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# THE FLAME THAT IS FRANCE

This book, under its French title, ***La Flamme au Poing,*** was awarded the Goncourt Prize in Paris for the year 1917.

# THE FLAME THAT IS FRANCE

BY

HENRY MALHERBE

TRANSLATED BY V. W. B.

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TO MY VERY DEAR

RENÉ DELANGE

WHOSE LIFE HAS BEEN FOR ME
A LONG ACT OF FRIENDSHIP

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# THREE DIALOGUES

# THE FLAME THAT IS FRANCE

## THREE DIALOGUES

IT is now fifty-five days since we took up our position in this shattered wood, stripped bare by steel and flame. The violence of the battle, far from abating, grows ever fiercer and more desperate. Our sensibilities, racked by the horror and distress of it, fretted by enthusiasm and hatred, have gone mad, reined in as they are, trembling, rebellious.

They have often spoken of relieving us. Colonel D—— has to hold us back. He knows our rage of destruction, the vehemence of our instinct of self-defense, of re-

venge. . . . And our commandant, Major H——, unceasingly holds out hope to us, drives away the bitterness that invades us. But those that remain have haggard faces, scorched, pitiful to look upon. Fatigue makes them feverish and dry. They are the irreducible slaves of a tragic cause, of which they obscurely feel the urgency and the grandeur.

It is a strange landscape that lies before us, scarred and mounded. The little valley where we are has an indescribable air of something worn-out, artificial, unreal. A battlefield of today! It suggests a laboratory that is occupied by some ferocious and sinister kind of scientists and encumbered with chemical apparatus and thunderous machines. . . . Pharmaceutical odors hang about the amputated trees, creep over the soil which the fiery hail has blackened. During the whole afternoon the enemy has been sending us tear-shells that burst with a sound

like clattering tinware, spreading out their veils of mephitic mist, discharging their sharp, insinuating odors of mustard, sandalwood, and incense.

Another evening has arrived, clad in a mist mottled with countless spots of light, each accompanied by a deafening explosion. It is my turn to stand guard, this night through, at headquarters. A few rays, thin and bluish like swords, pass between the roughly joined planks of the door of my shelter.

One grows accustomed to these feverish, lonely vigils. Even by day we rarely speak to one another. Amid these turbulent throngs we at the same time dread being separated and keep to ourselves. And the love of life and friendship persists so strongly in the burning solitude that we come to endow all things with existence, the disconsolate and mutilated trees, the roads that mount up and lose themselves in the craters, the lacerated earth, our own over-

heated weapons and the guns that growl and go through the same movements over and over, like black howling dervishes. How many times I have caught our men with grave tenderness addressing their rifles, their bayonets, their helmets, their cannon, the smooth, heavy shells which they were about to send off!

Captain A—— and Lieutenant L—— just now proposed to relieve me of my watch. I refused to go. L—— insisted, very affectionately:

"You must think of yourself. You are very tired."

It is true,— I feel faint. I light a candle that shrivels as if in a fury to consume itself. . . . There comes a mysterious breath, the door trembles, I feel the presence of someone. . . .

Three beings had come to make me a visit. They seemed very tall; nevertheless, they found room in this low, narrow shelter. I

felt, I divined these presences rather than actually distinguished them.

How can I repeat to you the sweet, profound colloquies that have passed between us? Here we are accustomed only to a language that is harsh and abrupt. The memory of grave and musical words, of expressions that are true and fine, deserts me. My heart is hardened. I cannot describe these apparitions, diaphanous yet actual, incorporeal yet visible, diffused yet possessing the breath of life. I can do no more than faithfully transcribe their discourse, made up of music, of mystery, of perfume and of magic.

But since the beginning of the war we have rubbed shoulders with so many strange men that this encounter has not surprised me.

Is it my weariness that has raised these beings up before me, these beings which have the fire and the color of life,— of something other, something greater than life?

For a long time now we have been placed

upon those frontiers of humanity from which it is only a step to the other side. There everything is stripped bare. Ideas, reduced and broken up, retain a crude, blinding light, an indescribable brilliance like that of a crystal inflamed by the setting sun.

In all truth, I have little taste for conversations with symbolic personages. It suits me better to talk with almost any poor man, however miserable, to decipher an actual face that life has humbled, that passion has worn and suffering scarred.

But memory, love and death have addressed me with voices of entreaty, lowly and appealing. Their little philosophy struck me as rather commonplace, rather easy-going, and their heroism as slightly conventional. By an artifice for which my readers might be grateful I could have named them René, Helène and Françoise. But I prefer to be more candid. Besides, I think the truth is more commanding and more accessible in the

form of an idea than of a personage. . . .

In this collapse of all living things, in this besetting lust of destruction to which all who surround us seem to be consecrated, we naturally endow with less vital force the organism that is so swiftly shattered than the thought which endures.

What need have I to ask excuses? Memory, love and death have come, this night, to me. I have seen them, I tell you, in a disturbing incarnation. And as we no longer fear anything and no one can astonish us for long, I have talked with them as with new comrades of the battlefield. Well I knew, when I refused to quit my post, that something singular and extraordinary was going to happen to me, that the very depths of my soul were to be stirred, that I was to find myself face to face, in this night of solitude, with the unknown beings that rule over my destiny.

# I

## MEMORY

HE is a tall young man very like my brother and a certain friend. His features are irregular and sad, his hair light. His look reminds me of my mother's, whose eyes are so sorrowful. His gracious, airy presence blends with the half-obscurity of a corner of the shelter. He speaks in a penetrating voice, his blue lips trembling.

"I have come to you tonight because, in the hardships of your present life, you forget those who are dearest to you. You have spread out on your knees the pictures of those you love and for all the strength of your heart you cannot evoke them distinctly. In the presence of death, we forget those who help us to live."

"You are mistaken. They are always in my memory."

"You believe that, in response to your eager longings, they come to you as they really are? They are better or worse than you imagine. Permit me to free them from the tarnish that has gathered over them; let me give these darkened images a few touches of fresh color, a few lines to strengthen the blurred silhouettes. . . . You see, they are enveloped in the mist of absence. For a few moments, you can live once more in their presence."

"But are they possessed by the same nostalgia? Do they think of us with the same love?"

"If you could see their reddened eyes. . . . When you go, we do not know how much you mean to us. . . . We never quite grow used to your disappearance. . . . Your sorrows are ours; by some strange magnetism, they reach even us. And you have the delirium of action that is lacking to us."

"Do you desire so much, then, to have us

back among you? Are you not a little afraid to meet us again with everything that is violent in us exposed, our passions out of hand? Have not our places been taken? Equilibrium is already restored. We shall disturb it perhaps. Ah, notoriously ambiguous are the emotions which our sacrifices, our losses provoke. . . ."

"Be still; do not blaspheme. You do not hear the prayers of your people, their cries of distress. Think of those who have not been able to endure the ordeal and whose hearts have broken with anguish, think of those who no longer believe in humanity, who no longer wish to see anything and anticipate nothing!"

"But the rest? We have abandoned everything we own, everything we enjoy, at the crossroads of the world. All who pass by will not respect these things. It is in their hands to forget us and undo us. Our personalities have been torn apart. How can

we find ourselves again in this cataclysm? We are the soil itself in movement, numerous, plentiful as the trees of the forest beaten by the storm. We are no more to be distinguished than the tangled branches of the thicket, of the bush, of the jungle."

"I am less sorry for you than for your mothers, your children, your friends. They were united about your soul as about a lamp. It was your air they breathed and your activity nourished them. They cannot fill the void that you have left in them. It is a corner deep in shadow against which they forever fling themselves as against a wall that shuts off the horizon and confounds their eyes."

"That does not prevent them from resuming the fragrant course of their existence, welcoming its joys, opening themselves to the sweetness and harmony of life."

"But you, you have a share in this magnificent adventure. You intoxicate yourself

with the unrivalled glory of it. Ah! these glorious armies made up of such multifarious peoples, such variegated colors! You knead the dough from which the new world will arise. And they remain in their narrow paths whither nothing reaches them but the muffled echo of your noble enterprises. For two whole years you have dwelt in the open air, in communion with the earth which you defend."

"Oh, my poor little blue room, my books so full of melancholy and friendship, my little terrace facing the misty garden. . . ."

"You inhabit a reality so intense that you forget the splendor of these fruitful and destructive deeds of yours."

"Who will realize the grandeur of our sacrifice, the bitterness that overtakes us after fierce engagements, our religion of duty?"

"I draw flattering portraits of you."

"When we no longer exist, who will tell

them of the beauty that has died with us?"

"They have seen you in your youth and strength. They will always see you so. Those bright and happy images will never leave their eyes. What man would not wish at his death to leave behind such memories? They will never be able to convince themselves that you will not return again. They will start up at every sound of a key in the lock, at every footfall on the path. You will not die in their hearts. The fire that gives you life will be tended. It will spring up in the air they breathe and the place that knows them. Do not think that only the malingerers, the cowards, the aged, and those who have special protection are going to survive the war. You will live again in all those you have left, and the beauty that consumes you will find its way even into those who do not seem to you worthy. Have confidence in me."

"Let them ever bear in mind, then, that we shall be watching them, judging them, holding them responsible."

There is a sudden crash, a crepitation. I brush by my visitors and dash out. A magazine of many-colored rockets has exploded at our left. They shoot through the sombre air with their soft, luminous curves like glittering birds of the Antilles. Their sparkling, gayly radiant plumes are scattered hither and thither and extinguished like satisfied desires. Opposite, far away, the gleams of a great fire besplash with gold the nocturnal sky. The detonations grow less frequent and seem less violent. A fresh and gentle fragrance like that of the hawthorn steals forth, as if in compassion, brushes through the mist and the chemical odors and brings me, in this evil abode of tragedy and weariness, a glad, enchanting surprise.

## II

### LOVE

I RETURN to headquarters. A mysterious tranquillity takes hold of me, restores me. Our work is all ready for the morrow. I have nothing to do but to watch and await new orders. A sort of warmth spreads over my solitude. And I relapse once more into revery.

I turn my head to one side. The slender young man is still there. I observe two women, one at his either hand. One of them detaches herself from the mysterious group. She seems to come toward me. She envelops me with her heady, impalpable presence.

How exquisite she is in her shadowy frock of the latest mode! Her flushed, boyish face agitates me just like those I have loved. She

sighs, unconstrained but blushing a little, not knowing how to begin our conversation. Taking pity on her confusion, I say to her:

"To everything that is worth the price of suffering, to everything for which we struggle and die, we give a woman's face. You are the dream that mounts up in us, bitter and abrupt. Our ardor, our temerity, our headstrong sacrifice are impassioned evidences of love and of our endeavor to win your tenderness, your recognition, your pride. Ah, you know well enough what it is we fear, that you will not in all ways prove worthy of our renunciation. Our sufferings you yourselves must merit."

"Do you not feel that we are behind you, like the long glances of love? A corner of our hearts, the best, the purest, is kept for you."

"Oh, jealousy has no place in our thoughts. That is a mean and petty sentiment which has no place in this war."

"We cannot have the perfection of your austerity. Since you are inclined to meditation this evening, I shall try to descend into the depths and bring to the light the motives and reactions of the feminine soul as it is. As for you, you have gone back to the earth, to the stark life of instinct, purified of all alloy of artificiality, to the ingenuousness of the animal. That simplicity has communicated itself to us and taken all the stronger hold upon us because we are closer to nature. For death ravages our work which was already sad enough. The war unpeoples this planet which we have been charged with the task of enriching with men. Today a sombre and breathless ardor to recreate possesses us. We must replace those who have vanished. I have none too many workwomen to fill up the void. It is in this way you ought to interpret the excesses, the license of these captives who remain without masters, intoxicated with their transitory freedom.

Do not condemn them without a hearing. Their submission to the rigorous and impenetrable commands of the world provokes these impulses that seem to you delinquencies."

"Ah! What weighty excuses! And from you, the last one to make them! Are we to think then, that will, dignity of feeling, the conquest of insolent instincts are to be forever alien to the abodes of free women?"

"Why these ill-natured words? Have you, too, then, had to bear the news of a mistress's inconstancy?"

"Perhaps. . . ."

"Do not be indignant. It is certain she is in tears now. Often she finds your image before her eyes. She bewails her ruined love, her squandered destiny and that thirst to create which she can never quench. Again she says to herself: 'He is the best and greatest of men.' Another, sly and rough, has come prowling about her. Faced with

the innumerable deaths of this war, she who was made to give life has felt the passion to bring forth supplanting duty and memory."

"Do not continue this specious discourse. Know, however they may fail, that we remain unblemished and strong. No longer can the triumphant mechanism of our muscles suffer impairment under these calamities. We brave the heaviest storms."

"Meanwhile, the greater number of them soberly keep faith with you. We tremble unceasingly, knowing that you are in peril. You are the cause of a sombre and perpetual fear that holds us in imperishable bonds. And you fill us with pride in the very hour of our distress."

"Go, leave us to our inflexible destiny, our solitary passion. We are caught up in a love that is more lasting, more sincere. We give ourselves to liberate the nations, those splendid prisoners, the oppressed peoples, for noble ways and generous ideas. . . ."

"Yes, with us you might grow weak and waste yourselves. Instead, you leave us, with our desires unappeased. . . . You bring us also the sorrow, the destruction that is yours. To love, is it not to run to meet death, is it not to perish?"

"It is also to live again."

"Egoists,— you are that, all of you, at the Front! — you never think of your lost wives, your deluded fiancées. If you are killed, how shall they heal their irresolute and forever wounded souls? Thrown to the earth, prostrate at the crossroads, how, without stability and without a guide, shall they again take up their rugged paths?"

"Ah, but you just now told me that their creative frenzy dominated this anguish and drove away despair."

"But we are not all like that. It is true of those who lack conscience and the sense of shame. . . ."

"The majority. . . ."

"No! Our menacing instincts are disarmed. They are lost in scruple and in discipline. They change themselves into sentiment and thought."

"Did you not say that you were too weak to resist the winning commands of nature?"

"Possibly, when we interpret them in our own way. . . . The rest of us cannot so swiftly trample our moral beliefs and our habits under foot. Come, of us two, I, I am the more faithful, the more easily intimidated. . . ."

"Indeed? How easy to charge others with the ill-deeds with which you are reproached!"

"Reflect and you will understand. We used to have your tender protection. We reposed in your love. We travelled, hand in hand, the difficult roads of the world. Existence no longer frightened us and the future we regarded with glad eyes. We were accustomed to your faults, your rough-

nesses, and you cherished our capriciousness. We took pride in your courage and your intelligence and you found us exquisite. . . ."

"What are you leading up to?"

"And then our love is broken apart! Do you imagine we can form new ties so soon? It takes so long, it is so complicated, so painful to learn to know, to admit another man."

"A good many are not greatly troubled by that. . . ."

"Strange creature, a man! And a woman also. To meet an unknown being, the secrets of whose heredity have not yet been revealed, to begin again, before one's wound has been able to heal, the winning artifices, the little deceits of love — that is beyond my strength, I think. No longer can I accept that irksome task, those labors without hope. . . . Besides, what assurance will a second choice bring to one whom a hero has loved and who has betrayed him in his absence? How can

one hazard that new experiment in passion, how feel anything but shame in those clandestine intimacies, how escape the tormenting recollections that are certain to rise up at every turn?"

"I assure you that one begins those things unconsciously and quite casually gets oneself committed. . . ."

"I shall not listen to your insinuations. You have said that we must deserve your sufferings; I reply that you ought to marvel at our renunciations. For our mission, our very nobility constrains us to a creation that nothing can interrupt. We are obliged to repair the evil you commit. And yet how many there are who exile themselves forever from these vital joys and fly, with your inanimate memory, from the sweet fulfillment of their fertile destiny!"

"And we? We shall have known scarcely the first tremors of the joy of earth. We shall hardly have inhaled the fragrance of a

single spray in the limitless gardens. I still sense the perfumes of the city. . . . No, today your beauty no longer moves me; it is lost and unavailing like an inaccessible oasis."

"Some day you will find us again."

"Perhaps. . . . But the long absence alters us and absolves you."

"I can promise you the contrary! Your fiery outlines, cut, loftier and more beautiful every day, against the tumult of battle, astonish and oppress us."

"If I were sure of always keeping you, I should kneel and weep for the joy of it. But my heart congeals and grows dry to think how far away you are, at the mercy of unworthy suitors. And I check the tender songs, the warm words that rise to my tightened lips. . . ."

"Your present life makes you unjust and hard. A few among you, I hope, will understand and have pity. . . . Of all the rest I

implore a little less distrust, a little more respect. Tonight, I see, I shall not reach your heart. I shall say no more and set forth again. . . ."

I wanted to speak further with her, to speak more sympathetically, to do penance for my distress. . . .

My shelter seems darker than before. She is no longer there. . . . That soft rumor, is it the rustling of dead leaves or the whisper of the radiant silk that envelops her brushing against the trees in her flight? . . . Those sad sounds, puzzling, prolonged, do they come from the moaning wind or from that sorrow which grows dim and fades away? . . . I have opened my door upon the night, and I seek again the beloved wayfarer whom I have not held back and who has not remained with me.

An explosion has just resounded close by. The concussion makes me stagger. An enemy shell has burst over a piece in our first

battery. There are four wounded and two dead.

Angrily and in bitter haste we bear away the mutilated men and cover with tent-cloths the remains of those who have been killed. The diffused light of a lantern falls on the decapitated body of an under-officer. Between his shoulders we still see the sticky orifice, seething and red. . . . Ah! Throw quickly over this corpse the cloth your trembling hands hold.

## III

### DEATH

THESE horrors of an atrocious war no longer paralyse our energies. An hour afterward, these sanguinary visions lose their sharpness and with a keener decision and the same fatalistic obstinacy we go on with the task already begun.

I look at my watch; it is three o'clock in the morning. I must stand guard until five. Those evocations of the past rush over me again, tinged with a sardonic melancholy. Memory, love! And there is death astir behind these consoling and friendly phantoms. . . .

What! Have they not finished tormenting me with regrets, deceitful apparitions of my fancy that they are? In a shadowy cor-

ner I become aware of another eddy, a strange breath, an invasive movement. . . .

"Look at me. Have I an ill-favored form, grimacing, unsightly? Do I frighten you?"

A young woman, wise, throbbing, exquisite, smiles like a pitying and watchful angel at my gaze. Her voice is fresh and musical like a spring that tumbles over white pebbles and cradles the tangled hair of the grasses.

"O Death, dark morning, victory of the shades, do you assume this radiant magician's face to lure us, to astound us, to make us cross your threshold of quick-lime, stone, and shadow?"

"I present myself to you under my familiar aspect and clothed in serenity."

"I did not imagine you so."

"You are ignorant children, deluded and heedless. Do you not understand that you keep alive a dissonance in the music of this world? But I shall draw you out of that

abyss where you devour one another, where you track down the humble, ingenuous animals and barbarously tear away their skins. . . . In my shining gardens I shall give you calm, order, harmony. . . . When I meet you in these caverns it is so easy for me to engulf you. Already, in your blue uniforms, you are fragments of the sky. Almost insensible is your passage into the atmosphere."

"Stay! All the springs, all the summers that we still might live. . . ."

"Do not give way to regret. You should thirst for other delights. Turn your head. Lift it. All the enchantments of which you dream, all the cherished thoughts are comprehended in the terrible deed to which you are constrained today. Spare yourself the slow stages of a whole lifetime of suffering. Each of your efforts turns for its meaning to me. But in the struggle you keep up your transports have the harmonious force,

the passionate melody of eternal things. Your activity is so intense that it leads you, immediately, to me."

"Oh, I have still so much to see and to love in this world! Destiny has placed me here, a sorry creature conscious of my approaching doom, and I shall have passed by so many beauties I shall not have tasted, beauties I shall never have truly known but for which, in spite of all, I was born. Could I have torn myself from ignorance, filled my sluggish soul, so placid, so ephemeral, with the powers, the colors, the splendors my inspired forefathers have lavished on this earthly domain. . . ."

"Here you are like beggars in the squalor they love. I end your servitude. I open the gate of that narrow prison which your body is. Ah! crush the love of this misery to which you are all too accustomed. Henceforth, your existence will be pure, free from the base sorrows of the flesh."

"No. Not yet. My eyes are made for dwelling on these perishable delights, my arms for clasping these pliant things to which life gives birth and which I cannot despise."

"You must lift yourself to the absolute, to the sublime, where they are whom you believe dead and who are not dead. They love you and they summon you already. They rise from their graves, they quit their crystalline heights to survey your aspiring companies, and they shed tears of admiration."

"I am not willing to vanish yet."

"You will not vanish. When you have laid aside the grievous burden of your flesh, you will be transformed into impalpable graces, wandering and purified flames, the supreme and secret guardians of your comrades and your friends. Those that have dwelt in France, in this favored corner of the earth, still float in its hallowed atmosphere. . . . The motherland? It is the garden where one has grown up among these watch-

ful souls, these phantom inspirers and protectors. There, man becomes an aggregate of rare and ancient presences, a magnetic centre that attracts so many burning memories, such splendors of the inner life, such invisible, vibrant forces, perpetually suspended in space, that call like ships at the obscure island of a living body and give it loyalty to the past, guidance for the future, and all the divine, intoxicating fragrance of the infinite!"

"Oh, how persuasive and consoling is your invitation to cross the gulf! What are you, then? An exquisite, deceitful sophist or the queen of truth?"

"Sincerity, I tell you, the way that is pure and clear, naked rhythm, the beating wing of an eternal prayer! As for you, you toil in the market-place of the blind, without perceiving the sages that smile at you, surprised and shy, at the corner of the entering streets,— without drinking of the cool

waters of the spring. Call to your mind those words of the Gospel: 'Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free!'"

"Your sermon is all very well. . . . But I should prefer not to be so quickly delivered from existence. Its illusions are to me a precious boon."

"From which you, in your turn, ought to liberate yourself. Let your action be adventurous, heroic, and spontaneous. Realize how unique the occasion is. By a noble, religious effort you can surmount these accumulating horrors, unite yourself with our plenitude, augment our ascending caravan. Fugitive shadow, why create for yourself a covetous, tyrannical personality, attached to the dust that is going to regain possession of you, instead of treading these ephemeral paths humbly, with bent head and clasped hands? You are not indispensable to the movement of the world, you are not essential

to its activity; the clock of time will not be put out of order by your disappearance."

"What matter if you do snatch us from these terrestrial shores toward which my heart still turns! Only, in the bonds of our affection my friends and I have established a fragile and precious human harmony. You bring confusion into it by taking me away."

"You substitute, then, for the grand equilibrium of the universe these petty, illusive economies? But even in the darkest souls the echo of the eternal rhythm rings! Be not deceived; when, in this war, you abandon your existence, the living will praise your generous effort less than your own deliverance, your swift arrival at the radiant city that is so far away. . . ."

"You see, what offends and distresses me is the ugly, sanguinary martyrdom you have the power to inflict on my young body, so agile and vigorous, its decay in some ditch

unknown to those that might bedew it with their tears and their prayers."

"Ah, shrewd, cautious soldier, that harrowing pity for the beloved remains that decay in the earth does not so much disturb the minds of today. . . . Has not the disintegration that you fear already begun to take place in these burrows you have inhabited for two years?"

"And so you are quite convinced that our burial will be for us only the continuation of our present way of living?"

"This evil garment of flesh, these obscure indignities, why should they matter to you, after all? From the spot where it will be hidden may rise, perhaps, a beautiful leafy tree, a fragrant rosebush, more than a few swaying stems of nourishing grain. . . . You do not know my secret designs and for what an inexhaustible harmony you have been created and are going to die. . . . Be brave. Be strong. Be noble."

"Since, this night, you feel pity for me, do not leave me in this agonizing ignorance. Tell me. . . ."

With one white finger on her closed and smiling lips, the enigmatical young woman has already disappeared in a ray of the rising sun. . . .

And behold, a profound, sorrowful impulse urges me to follow that angel of despair. A serene desire for death and departure points my way to the supreme adventure. A sombre longing for annihilation treads under foot my wishes of an hour ago. Yes, to go, even I, down there, to efface myself in the general mystery of things, to engulf myself in the dim tranquillity of the numberless dead, to tear myself from illusion, from discord, and from cruelty. . . .

In a tremorous light, in some illusory scene beyond time and space, the beloved events of my past come to life again. . . .

In a luminous rapture I make my confession, murmuring:

"I thank thee, my God, for having granted me, in these so few years, all the charms and all the sorrows of life. That I might the better appreciate its joys, you caused me to be born in wretchedness and obscurity. In your grace you elected me to hear your divine voice even in the violence of men. You permitted me to keep in my heart the full discourse of your religion while others in their old age lost their way and forgot you in this degrading dungeon of life. Your mercy toward me is infinite and I see a new proof of it in that you permit the axe of death to strike my brow while I am still young and have hardly begun to taste the mortification of decrepitude.

"At first, you let me run wild like an animal in the gardens of the earth, and that I might marvel at their verdant activity in the

splendor you had permitted them, you tore away the veils that obscured my sight and I rejoiced like a child intoxicated with your holiness.

"Later, you exalted so high, so brightly lighted up my poor heart of dust that it shone in space like your well-beloved stars and drank in the flowery prospects of the world.

"Lord, you have made me wander in stirring countries, inspiring and splendid, and I have travelled round and round this globe as if it did not suffice me, as if the atmospheric current of other planets were drawing me even when I might have died in some dark corner, ignorant of your ineffable footprints.

"What my eyes could not see you have let my heart find by offering me the disquieting spectacle of events that were humble in seeming but of infinite significance.

"You have filled me with a vast and quickening love for my fellowmen, and since I had

no child of my own you have laid upon the bodies of these men a childlike feebleness, giving me the power to sustain them like a father with all my youthful strength.

" I have reason to be proud that you have averted wickedness from my path and that to spare me the bitterness of remorse you have thrown me into the grievous turmoil of the war. Lord, I bless your name for having looked down upon my weakness and for granting me death in such circumstances that I can believe it has befallen me as an atonement for the violent things I have done.

" Lastly, you have let me spring up in the fullness of day, with all the freshness, the abundance, the bold suppleness of a jet of water that mounts toward your balconies, and behold, you add to your bounty the supreme boon: you cut it short without causing me pain, and I expire in the moment of taking flight toward your heavenly terraces. . . ."

Already, how light it is!

Strange, unshapely insects, of some unheard of species, throng my table, my papers, troops of them skipping happily about as the night grows pale. In the intervals between explosions the placid, indifferent, unconcerned note of the cuckoo lifts itself, and the frail and chirping cry of the marsh warbler. The day rises swiftly, furtively stealing in, like a pirate returned from a raiding expedition who tosses with full hands into my shadowy cavern his ingots of glittering gold. My watch is ended.

I go forth to drink in the new morning. The chilly, velvety air presses my face. My reason, which has recovered its equilibrium, marvels and smiles at these nocturnal dialogues.

*Verdun. May 26, 1916.*

# MEMORY

## IV

### PORTRAITS AND IMAGES

I SHOULD prefer not to afflict your eyes, already saddened by so many unmerited miseries, so many crushing atrocities, with any more pictures of suffering and cruelty. It is enough for me to have explored that abyss. I do not wish even to preserve the memory of it. I threw away my first notebook, because I believed that by some magnetic force that revocation of tragic hours would call up others to my sight. . . .

But, O my lost friends, my tortured brothers, can I in after years forget your dishonored features, the unknown sacrifices of your pathetic heroism? Shall I forget, even I, my own strange sensations and all these spectacles of a black and furious humanity? Too well I feel it; I must keep watch, I must

keep watch for myself over this collection of portraits and images of a reality so bitter and so poignant that it surpasses all the visions of nightmare and delirium.

Only, I cannot and I will not transcribe these agonies with too great exactitude. They have all passed through a heart that is torn with pity and sadness, in a grey and trembling atmosphere. . . . And besides — I say it sincerely — I fear lest over-exact evocations will bring back again these days of death and ferocity.

My heart, conduct me through this gulf, raise up, in your diffused, wavering light, this wreckage and these bones which my memory consecrates, purifies, loves. . . .

* * *

I have always had a fearful conception of what life must be like under the sea where monsters are eternally at war, devouring one another. Just why I do not know, but I

feel as if I had been immersed, bewildered, in these oceans of murder. . . . And behold on the shore a humble and unskilful book. . . . When, O my God, shall I remount to the surface, to the light?

* * *

I have gone over in detail everything that is to follow, a detail the intensity of which sickens me whenever I reread my notes. My already confused sensibility drooped or grew feverish over these brutal recitals. No longer will I listen to this maddening voice. I must recall these things calmly, transmuting the fever into a vibration that is pathetic, soothing, transparent. . . . I shall suffer less from these dulled recollections. In this way I shall call up as tenderly as I can my beloved and sorrowful existence of today. I shall show myself neither stronger nor weaker than I am. Has not a great writer — who was it? — spoken of a "heroic melancholy"?

## V

### THE BURNING GAZE

THE observation post which I command is very flimsy, built like a great eagle's nest, suspended among the trees, on the spur of a bluish hill. It affords views of the whole of our sector. It seems almost to slip over the edge of the promontory that descends to the estuary of the shaggy meadow. It advances on the enemy like the prow of a ship, of which the flanks, stern, and rigging are still hidden in the mist.

All the violent engagements that have taken place here have not consumed the beauty of this landscape.

Three devastated villages lie prone in the valley, behind our first lines. The crumbling old houses stare in sad astonishment at their

wounds reflected in the swiftly running waters. A few red tiles still cling to the torn roofs of these ancient cottages that so suggest pathetic, mumbling, old paralyzed granddams, their hair bound in great kerchiefs with red squares. The mournful, misshapen silhouettes of rickety and rusty ploughs, ox-carts, broken trucks stand out against the tumultuous horizon. And all these suppliant things speak to the heart, lamenting their sorrows, begging for pity or revenge. . . . The church alone, ecstatic, prayerful, careless of her wounds, lifts aloft the cracked and tottering belfry which has slid back, so to say, on her neck like an astrologer's cap, catching every night on its dark point a resplendent star.

I have scrutinized these landscapes of the Meuse so long that they have inlaid themselves upon my sight in lines of fire. I still see them when I close my eyelids. Beautiful, pathetic fragment of the countryside that

haunts my gaze, I carry you with me folded up in a corner of my memory.

* * *

The personnel of the observation post comprises infantrymen, artillerymen, and sappers. But they are no longer distinguishable from one another. Their present work obliterates all differences. They are no longer anything but lookout-men. Their whole will is focussed in a gaze, the concentrated clearness of which is directed, like a sword, like a fiery thrust, upon the enemy. The instinct of the chase has remounted from our ancestral depths. It has perfected itself. It has acquired a feverish, a flashing acuteness. Everything gives place to the sharp desire to spy out the enemy. To this phosphorescent vision, this subtile sense of hearing, there is added a strange, fierce instinct that makes one scent the enemy, foresee the place whither he is moving, bite one's

clenched hands that one cannot pursue him, spring at his throat and throw him in a relentless struggle of wild beasts.

A branch that trembles, a wisp of smoke, a fresh tint of earth, of tracks in the miry road, the swelling of a breastwork, a swift streak of flame, a tiny upper window where a shadow stirs, have for us an exact and passionate significance. The cunning enemy hides in the ground and creeps along under cover of the high grass. But nothing that happens passes unperceived. We can see him move ten kilometers behind his lines. The telescope that throws its bright reflections within the penumbra of the observatory accuses the distant and detested shadows. They stir in its field of view like bacilli and microbes across a microscope, veritable malady as they are of the suffering earth.

To anyone who surveys it for the first time, the panorama of this battlefield appears lifeless, deserted, animated only by the turmoil

of the shells that glide wailing through the air as if on a road of glass and at the point of impact toss aloft the spurting clay, like jets of black water. To us the scene is always in rolling and convulsive motion. On these slopes, which seem empty and solitary, we discover the enemy everywhere, his squat, breathless motor-cars, his heavy horsemen, his hypocritical workmen, defilers and despoilers. The Teuton is in perpetual discord with this precious landscape; it rejects him, betrays him, disclaims him, points him out as a sick man points out the abscess that consumes him.

* * *

Colonel de M——, who comes now and then to my observatory, had given me permission to unloose the fire of our batteries on certain important objectives which might suddenly come into my sight. Eight days ago, a long brown, sinuous mass crawled over

a certain narrow, white road, and moved back. I observed it through the glass, while on his side the man on watch examined it. . . . A single cry, hollow and brief. I take certain measurements on the map. Then, I fling through the telephone:

"*Aux coördonnées X* — . . . *Y* — . . . A troop of about two hundred men is descending on Ch——. Fire! I am watching."

A moment after, a hurricane of artillery beats down on the enemy reinforcements. . . . That evening, in the shelter of my friend L——, we finished the cherry-brandy which he had been keeping for great occasions at the bottom of his canteen. And L——, his eyes sparkling and happy, said to me:

"By Jove, my boy! It 's not every day that we demolish as many as that. . . ."

Time was when Captain G——, seeing some Bavarians debouch at fifteen hundred

meters, hesitated before giving the order to fire. Later he confessed to me:

"I had a momentary feeling of immense pity when I saw those active, breathing young men who were going to be massacred and whose existence lay wholly in my hands . . ."

That perplexity does honor to Captain G——. Nevertheless, I must add that his battery opened the fire of hell on the enemy column, annihilating it. Since then, Captain G—— has been severely wounded. He has come back from the front mutilated. He has experienced to the full the adversary's methods of combat. He knows these scruples no more.

* * *

Having been for so long on the watch, retired within ourselves and alone, on this height, we have acquired a strange perspicacity, harassing and acute. We know one

another to the bottom and we know very well, too, what we are worth. Newcomers are embarrassed by the hard, searching glances we give them. People try to avoid those glances when we descend into the plain. We see through people too easily and even when we smile we are sizing up what they are feeling and doing.

The ordinary passions that held us once have lost their strength and their attraction. Events, spectacles, suffering affect our hearts differently from the way they once did. The instinct of the chase, of self-preservation, a few naked and precise ideas, senses that are pure, clean, penetrating, possess us and alone direct us. The details of the phenomena of life and death do not interest us any more.

We have thrown our former personalities into a common mould; and from the stream of youth and energy which they form we have drawn forth identical individualities, fervent and simplified.

Vigorous, piercing glances eager to ferret out, track down and taste the abhorred and deadly prey, can you any longer adapt yourselves to the little tendernesses of life, its peaceful, natural activities, its lesser, briefer sorrows, will you ever again veil yourselves with tears?

* * *

This dynamic, magnetic power of the eye which makes us foresee the position the enemy is going to take, follows him into the thicket and drives him to his fate, this luminous snare sometimes disquiets us and makes us tremble ourselves. It seems as if a mysterious faculty of divination had risen up in us. I recall with a pang that last year in Artois a tall old lieutenant came to our observation post close to the enemy lines. He wore with an air of easy elegance a dark old-fashioned uniform. His sad, grave, resolute face was crossed with a long, silvery

moustache. Careless of the bullets and the crashing shells he took off his cap, exposing his head with its grey temples. I remarked to him that persistent temerity might not only cause the death of our men — which, on the whole, he might not consider very important — but might also cause the destruction of our observatory, which was an excellent one. He replied, loftily:

"I am here to accomplish my mission. Nothing else concerns me."

He walked on, still feverish. But he had become more prudent. His energetic expression attracted us. His long flexible neck, corded with projecting veins, one of which was especially purple and swollen, impressed us, held our eyes wide, I scarcely know why. Three days afterward, while I was on my way to the battery past the branch-trenches I stood aside to give passage to two stretcher-bearers who were carrying a wounded man. I turned and recognized Lieutenant M——,

lying helpless. He had at his neck a great bloody star.

It seems absurd, no doubt, to extract a meaning from this singular fact. But have not certain animals the tragic gift of foreseeing the approaching death of beings that surround them? And has not the war in certain respects thrown us back to the primal simplicities?

Absurd or not, a strange, superstitious fear has forbidden us since that day to scrutinize too insistently the faces that are dear to us. . . .

## VI

### THE LAZAR-HOUSE

THE fair young woman looks at me pensively.

"If you return to your observation post," she says to me in a grave, sorrowful voice, "stop at the house which you find at the crossing of the roads to —— and ——. It is the farm where we used to live before the war. It has a modern appearance. But there is something odd-looking about it because it was built on the site and even on the foundations of an ancient lazar-house. . . . You will tell us if the enemy's artillery has not too far destroyed it. . . ."

A few days later, I passed by the strange house, its grey and red a crumbling ruin.

. . . The bricks of a part of the façade had fallen right into the road, forming what looked like an inexhaustible stream of blood. . . . Some soldiers were living in the ruined farm.

* * *

An attack took place yesterday. The prisoners are still packed in this devastated house. They do not talk together. Suspicious, sullen, emaciated, they watch each other and us with a sly dread. A sergeant with great red moustaches, blue eyes, and a broad nose listens, motionless and attentive, to these words of a French lieutenant of infantry:

"Your lying diplomacy is the laughing-stock of the whole world. It has reached the limit: no one will ever again believe what you say. Your leaders have dressed up the truth a little too clumsily. . . . Do you understand me, Monsieur Adolf? To lead a great

people one must have a great character. . . . But you are not a great people. . . . A band of slaves, that 's what you are. . . . Truth, liberty, one breathes such things in our country! As for yours. . . ."

The phrases of my comrade reach me punctured by a sudden series of explosions. The enemy has again begun to bombard the road. The order is given to descend into the basement.

* * *

This great cellar, with its massive vaults, its whitewashed walls, resembles an ancient hospital ward. . . . In the blinking light of the candles, the lean, sallow aspect of the prisoners takes on an expression of austerity and suffering. Their faces with closed eyelids and heavy jaws, their sorry air, their stiff angular bodies, give one the impression of a humanity that is unfinished, badly cut out, pushed forward into this epoch of ours with the blows of a rifle butt.

A sudden shock makes the walls tremble. The muffled explosion of a shell sends us a volley of stones and suffocating smoke. . . . An enemy projectile has cracked the heavy ceiling of the basement. Several men are thrown to the ground and covered with debris. They pull themselves up haggard with fear. By a miracle, nobody is wounded. The lights are kindled again.

* * *

We retire to the other end of the white, subterranean chamber. My confused eye endows with strange forms the beings about me and a feeling of hallucination invades me and masters my reason.

It seemed to me that the world had returned to the year one thousand. The enemy shell that had perforated the ceiling appeared to have rent the veil of time and broken space asunder. So vast was the gap it had made that it had spanned the dead centuries and

their secrets. . . . In this decayed lazar-house the Middle Ages rose again, like a black spring jetting up from the past.

In one corner I observed a number of human bones heaped up together like gnarled faggots gathered in the forest. Inadvertently, someone struck them with his foot. The funereal pile collapsed. . . . A sort of deep trembling communicated itself to the very fibres of our being. The most ancient sentiments agitated us, took hold of us; we breathed the thick, despairing atmosphere of a thousand years ago. The violent physical miseries that tormented our ancestors clutched at our flesh and infected it, as if we had been reborn in their exhausted, servile bodies.

The Teuton prisoners, with sombre faces, press close together, ignominiously shuddering, a herd surprised by the storm. I am struck anew by their cadaverous masks that suggest the baffled intruder, their frustrate

and backward sensibility, the barriers raised by their dark rancor. . . . They have come to life, those wretched serfs the reprobate "roturiers" of the Middle Ages, who raised up over the desolate earth famine, leprosy, and the black death. There they are, calamitous and of evil omen, trailing with them all their mediaeval misery.

Must we pen them up once more, those lepers whose deadly breath makes one shudder? The long years have not gone by, the world has not been renewed. The agonizing scenes of ten centuries ago seem actual and familiar to me.

With gestures that are intended to be brusk but are really controlled, simple and almost pious, our men distribute bread and preserves to the prisoners. . . . My comrades seem like lords of the manor, equerries, plebeians and peasants, impassioned with charity and just come from the town to give alms to the fierce lepers, the plague-stricken,

the criminals. . . . There is the page Astorg; Boniface, Robin the weaver, Oliver, Robert, Didier, Odon the tool-maker and Fulcran the goldsmith. . . . Taciturn, gluttonous, the captives devour the provisions. Our soldiers, withdrawing to a distance, continue to watch with burning curiosity the group of prisoners, swarming like immense hobgoblins in the shadow. . . . You would say our men were leaning over an abyss where the damned were writhing, having received their food and words of cheer. . . .

An immense quickening pity rises up out of the crumbling stones of this lazar-house and mounts to our hearts. Time and space are lost ideas. (For several minutes I cannot even represent them to myself.) And suddenly bodies, objects dissolve and are volatilized into wisps of opaque mist and golden dust. Of the life that is dear to me, real to me, all that remains, all that exists is a soft, delightful feeling, a warm, pure idea.

Thought has separated itself from matter and its unworthy lusts.

* * *

The enemy's bombardment has ceased. We all return to the ground-floor of the farmhouse. We assemble the prisoners, who are to be conducted to the rear.

I go out. The air is cold. A sentinel, his hands crossed on a level with his face, looks as if he were holding aloft a straight, slender flame. It is a bayonet which the man is holding, at the cross-bar, and the steel reflects the setting sun.

The enemy has just sent us some phosphor shells. The holes they have dug begin to sparkle strangely. One might think they had burst in a soil full of diamonds. The cortège of prisoners, encircled with bayonets, ascends the road and is lost among the shadowy fields. Evening falls over us.

## VII

### MOMENTS OF STORM

A POST of thirty-four Germans, surrounded on all sides, refuses to surrender. We attack them from above with hand grenades and rifle-shots. An under-officer lights a cigarette in defiance of our men. He is struck down.

* * *

A 305 has fallen. It passed through a house without bursting. It passed through another house and burst there. About sixty chasseurs were in it. Thirty killed or wounded. Groans and cries. One chasseur is cut in two, in the middle. He drags himself forward on his hands, in a trail of blood, abandoning half of his body, and screams, screams. . . .

* * *

There are two brothers and their cousin, infantrymen, who have been condemned to death. At first their courage rose to the assault and the troop occupied the little village and chased out the enemy. Then, suddenly, they started a panic. . . .

They are on their way to execution. The cousin carries himself well. He even wishes not to have a bandage. But the two brothers. . . .

As the shower of bullets strikes them, one of them cries out in terrible anguish:

"Do not kill my brother!"

The under-officer weeps while he gives them the coup-de-grace with a trembling revolver.

* * *

We are engaged in a task that has all the elements of grandeur. We are the exact, the disciplined executors of instinct. If the end were not very noble and very vast, we should not conduct ourselves quite as we do. When

shall we be wise enough, worthy enough to penetrate into the hidden meaning of all these violent acts imposed on us by destiny?

* * *

The words I have most frequently heard during the war have been, "Me, me, I, I . . ."

At every turn men fling their personalities in one's face. War lays men bare. The natural being is revealed in the nakedness of his defects and qualities. Everybody thrusts his individuality upon one's attention. The passion to show oneself, to push oneself forward. . . .

Lieutenant P——, who is attracted by the idea of aristocracy, says to me: "Politeness is also charity. Today one easily distinguishes those who have a heredity of courtesy, who come of educated stock. The flimsy mask of the others that dates back only one generation falls away very quickly,

while the men of race reveal their natural exquisiteness little by little and guard off every sort of moral maladdress. The former are all alike. Amid these searching ordeals you gradually fathom the latter."

Exaggerated words, unjust and many times disproved.

* * *

Passed through Bourget, Noisy-le-Sec, on the way to Verdun. We stopped two minutes at Bourget. From the train, from the door of the compartment, we marvelled at the outlines of the monuments of Paris. A dream. The Eiffel Tower, the Sacre-Cœur, the Trocadéro were darkly profiled against a bright clear sky. They looked as if they were built out of mist. How strange that impalpable appearance is! . . . Little by little, regretfully, we left them behind. . . . Slender factory chimneys, shooting upward. . . .

In our new position, on the opposite slope. The little road is pitted with shell-holes. Shrill whistlings, silken rustlings, concentric rumblings of numberless enemy shells. They have not buried the horses killed on the road. One of them has been covered up by a 150. He thrusts out his doleful head, wild, struggling. A terrible stench.

* * *

At four o'clock this morning, I went with a wagon to a magazine that had been blown up to get some planks for our shelters. Charred to cinders. Walls tumbling down. Cracked and broken boards. Fire and ruin. There still remain many tapes of bullets for the machine-guns, and several shields. We hasten; the wagon is not large enough. I lift a plank to my shoulder. All my men do the same. On the way back someone makes a joke. . . . The captain approves me:

" Be the first to obey the orders you give.

Among us that is the best way to command."

* * *

We attack today. Rain, snow, and hail. One sinks kneedeep in the mire. After a sufficiently momentous artillery preparation, our infantry fling themselves to the assault. They advance further than the appointed objective. Brave, brave men! One would not have thought they could attack in such weather. We surround a Boche battalion.

Just as L——, the young doctor, asks me for a pair of scissors and distracts my attention from the battery, a splinter from a 150 strikes my back. My clothes, my silk vest throw it off but I receive a terrible shock, just as if someone had hit me with a stick, struck me in the ribs with tremendous force. It makes a lump under my left shoulder, and my arm is slightly paralyzed.

But what bothers me most is to remain in the mud for eight hours. My feet are en-

tirely frozen, insensible. I put the shell splinter away — in my pocket.

* * *

With a little cart, every evening, he carried a cask of water up to the place where the battery is. A shell came for him and killed his horse. The little cart is shattered, the horse disembowelled. The water slowly trickles out through the holes in the cask. The driver has fallen into the road. That was three days ago. No one dreams of picking him up.

* * *

In the ravine behind us an infantryman has fallen face downward on the earth. They lift him up. His face is black. The little cyclist cries out: "Oh! a negro!"

He is an infantryman of the —— Regiment. Three rifles about him. He has been hit, wounded in the head and chest. He had

time to rid himself of his tent-cloth and gun. He must have cried out in the night.

* * *

Someone says to the captain:

"Do not go out just at this moment. They are shelling the position heavily. Wait."

"So much the worse," the captain replies; "we 've got to relieve our comrades; their nerves must be nearly gone. Come, forward!"

He gives the order. The company starts. A 210 falls in the midst of them. There are thirty victims.

Four days later they find the captain's head.

* * *

The Boche prisoners are rotten with vermin. I took part in an examination. Several of them who were very young said that

they would have surrendered long ago but for the " old fellows."

An infantryman pulls away a shoulder-strap from one of the German uniforms and finds under it a swarm of lice. He flings it on the ground, swearing in disgust.

* * *

Every evening at the moment of attack we hear the agonizing cries, the delirious screams of the wounded whom we cannot go to relieve, so terrible is the fusillade and the bombardment.

Some of them, this evening, realizing that they are dying out there, in the most frightful position between the two banks of flame and without hope of succor, were seized with a violent and mortal fury. With heavy hearts, all too heavy, we heard the cries of anguish, the recriminations of those men who had given themselves to the uttermost and whom no one could help. . . .

"Barbarians! wretches! to let us perish so! Barbarians! Savages!"

Always these words come back to us. Each time, there is some man who is shamed into yielding to these mournful appeals. There is a crackle of machine-guns. He is seen no more.

* * *

Captain L—— is a great big jolly fellow, with ruddy cheeks and a gay, frank, mischievous eye, a man who has every reason to praise the good things of life. On the staff of a great general. Always in luck!

He was informed yesterday that his "brother-in-law's brother" had disappeared, and was perhaps dead. Was the letter he received so very pitiable?

It is a misty morning, very early. Captain L—— comes out to the first line. All at once, before the astounded infantrymen, he leaps from the parapet, falling in the grass. . . .

He crawls about, this gigantic dandy, for more than an hour, goes up to every corpse between the two lines and turns it over, seeking his relative.

He comes back, his clothes soiled with blood and mire, his eyes wide with horror and pity. He has not found what he was looking for.

Today he has recovered his smile, his happy, confident expression.

* * *

Going out of my dugout I received a shock from a shell that brushed my head as it went whining by and scratched my left ear. . . . It is not a wound! But for several days I have been deaf in my left ear.

In order to receive communications over the telephone, I hold the receiver in my left hand at my right ear and write with my right hand. Good God, is it possible that I might be deaf some day, that I might no longer be

able to hear, to recognize my dearest friend, music, my comfort and my consolation?

As it is, I pity those who do not love music, the true truth. . . .

* * *

Lunched with Captain C——. . . . We ate in a tiny orifice. But it has signs up. They are changed as often as necessary.

It is a "drawing-room," a "dining-room," a "smoking-room,"— even a "bath-room!"

The cook wears at his throat an enormous iron cross. When the colonel goes to dine there, he puts on a Tam o' Shanter and a white apron with a decoration; when it is the commandant, the apron and the decoration; and when it comes to us, he modestly exhibits the iron cross alone. . . .

* * *

Craftiness, deceit, organization,— that organization upon which they rely so much, — logic in crime, long and minute prepara-

tion for theft and assassination, these are the essential marks of madness.

Are we fighting an army of lunatics?

I have been struck by these coincidences: in Artois, the enemy occupied a wood that bears the name, La Folie; in Picardy, on the Somme, our adversaries held another wood that also bears that prophetic name, La Folie.

Twice we have attacked the Germans at these points. They were assaults of unprecedented immensity. We, a people of moderation, of perspicuity, of reason, of pity, have sought to drive them out of those forests of La Folie! In spite of prodigious heroism, we have never succeeded. . . .

A Northern writer would find in this the elements of a circumstantial symbolism. Even for our sceptical spirits, there is something disturbing about it, something that almost looks like a revelation.

* * *

War inflames the passions. This elegant

under-officer is a gambler. When he can find no partners, he plays alone in his dugout, or in the ruined houses. The inappeasable thirst for adventure. . . . Out here, there is a sharper intensity in his gestures than when he used to play in his sumptuous haunts of old. I fancy he must have flung himself into the assault, staked his life, on the field, like a great sum of money on the green table. And he has lost . . .

* * *

I have at last succeeded in bringing together a few original ideas, a few images that strike me as fresh and true.

I have begun to arrange my word harmonies, to assemble my future phrases. . . .

But a single banal idea of a comrade, several banal ideas. . . . Their tumult prevails. . . . And my thoughts fly like over-dressed dandies, terrified. . . . It is difficult for me to find them again.

## VIII

### A BOMBARDMENT

NOTHING led us to expect this bombardment of our position. We had already received a respectable number of enemy shells. But the firing was uncertain, scattered.

Very early this misty morning a few salvos arrived, at regular intervals. An enemy aviator took observations over us. Then the explosions ceased. The day was clear and auspicious.

The young trees, rejoicing in their first leaves, swayed back and forth in the breeze. Grave and agile, the gunners loaded, aimed and fired with a strong methodical assurance. The lookout-man announced that we had set on fire the enemy battery which was our objective. And our men, who know how to

keep silence, continued, without stirring, to send forth their devastating projectiles.

* * *

An hour after noon the first salvos of the bombardment arrive. The medical student rises up, in the midst of his battery, and cries out:

"Rapid fire! For one shell that arrives, let them have two!"

Before even one enemy projectile has burst, the gunners reply to the fire of the adversary.

What follows is a vision of tragic and passionate grandeur. Shells of all calibres rain on us: 105's, 130's, 150's, 210's. Four men are wounded. While they are being carried away under fire to the Refuge, a stretcher-bearer receives a splinter of shell in his arm; he continues to carry his heavy burden without seeming to notice that he has been touched. It is not till the next day that he deigns to have his arm dressed.

Another wounded man, his face bitter and bloody, cries out:

"All right, Boches! Triple the dose!"

Their souls are so servile over there that as if by a sort of magnetism the order appears to have reached them. . . . And the bombardment is redoubled in intensity.

You might think that the soil was a sonorous wooden floor upon which great clumsy giants were stamping with hobnailed boots. You might think these great giants wished to trample under foot the men, the shelters, and our fine, swift guns. . . . How badly aimed their shots are! They strike, strike always at one side. Heavy, stupid anger. Not to be reduced, our battery continues to roar.

* * *

Commandant H—— has come down to the Major. He questions the wounded.

R——, the *mâitre-pointeur*, replies:

"I was afraid I was going to be wounded

somewhere else than at my post. But I was struck while I was pointing my piece. . . ."

What splendid men! The personnel of our group, slow, simple peasants of the midlands, live and move here with a heroism that is wholly free from emphasis and affectation, familiar and, if I may so express it, modest.

We return to our major's headquarters, fifty meters from the batteries. The bombardment thunders on without ceasing.

All of a sudden two soldiers dash into the shelter. They are the sappers of our radio-telegraph post. A shell of high calibre has burst against their shelter. One of the two men is deaf and stupefied. I pour him out a glass. He drinks. We try to cheer him up. He does not smile. He understands nothing. His comrade explains:

"You see, C—— had a very delicate hearing. . . . It is broken. . . . His ear was so fine, so musical that he received and distin-

guished the most delicate sounds of the *T. S. F.* . . . It 's a pity."

C—— looks at us with great candid eyes.

"Are they still falling?" he asks.

We all reassure him:

"No, no, indeed."

At that very moment two projectiles burst before our door. Their flames are long, as long, you would say, as the hair of a comet. . . .

* * *

Evening is about to fall. It is half past six. Our cook has deserted his flimsy cabin. We do not know where he has taken shelter! Nevertheless, we must have dinner. The young Lieutenant L—— and I decide to set the table. We have a few provisions.

The battle has begun again, violently, at our left. We hear the distant cannonading, like muffled thunder. . . .

At seven o'clock the bombardment ceases.

The light that we kindle is flickering and dull. Our retinas are still dazzled by the hard brightness of the explosions.

## IX

### THE HOUNDS OF STEEL

CAPTAIN G——, who was severely wounded at the end of 1914, returned three days ago to take command of his battery.

With careful art he conceals the lameness of his right leg and wears with such a happy, easy grace the red ribbon of his Legion of Honor that you would say he was flaunting a scarlet rose some mistress had given him and that the perfume of it produced in him a perpetual, airy intoxication. An exquisite type of our officer, to whom Dumas would have ascribed the noblest adventures.

Three hours after our captain's return, the enemy made our battery their target. An aviator flies very high over our position and

regulates by wireless the fire of the German guns.

Captain G—— gives our men the order to take to cover.

The German signal-men get to work rather quickly. Their range is five hundred meters. An hour after they have taken their observations, they send us an imposing number of big shells. One of our under-officers is killed. He did not want to take refuge in his shelter. Nonchalantly leaning against a tree, he was being shaved while this deafening bombardment was going on, by an improvised barber. The barber himself was wounded, as well as the man who was bringing him the water, taking his time about it. Our shelters and our guns are intact. A neighboring beet-field, with its over-luxuriant plumes, has been ravaged. . . .

Captain G—— comes up to me. Angry, sullen, unrecognizable, he exclaims:

"It 's preposterous! And the General

Staff has forbidden me to reply to these scoundrels! We know the exact position of the battery that is bombarding us. And the commandant prevents me from answering them under the pretext that I would only be showing them our exact position. . . . We must give those fellows the impression that they have annihilated the battery! I don't understand these new methods of warfare at all. Do you remember the first months of the campaign? Ah! replies did not have to wait then. How much better we fought!"

"We fought differently."

"Do you remember that Boche artillery we demolished the day I was wounded?"

* * *

And we call up those victorious hours as if, by suggestion, the memory of them might give rise to a new triumph. . . .

We have taken up our position under some stunted, twisted apple-trees, the branches of

which, trailing wearily almost to the ground, conceal us admirably. The battle has been one of the wildest violence. But the day was so lovely that the very corpses, which we have not yet been able to gather up, seemed to preserve a strange happiness. . . . Suddenly the captain gives the command:

"Attention!"

Below at a distance of two kilometers, we see a troop of bluish-green dwarfs creeping through the high grass. They are pushing some dark cannon along before them, obstinately, fantastically, and plunging into the forest. Six pieces of 77 are placed in this way opposite our battery at the edge of the wood.

We do not stir. There is a tense, distressing silence: we permit them to install themselves. The captain sends us his orders on little bulletins. . . . Suddenly, we start a thunderous fire. One of our sections belches out its explosive shells on the enemy

material, the other sends forth ball shells and prolongs its fire on the fleeing men. . . . Amid the explosions we hear distant roarings. Our men laugh, a laugh long and mad.

* * *

Today the captain has recovered his bright, engaging expression. Early this morning we, in our turn, squared accounts with the great pieces that bombarded us three days ago. Two of our aviators observed the effects of our fire, which found its mark.

The bases of the guns are sunk deep in the earth, to which the pieces are so tightly affixed you would say it was the soil itself, our soil of France, that was discharging upon the enemy, through these long grey tubes, the avenging flame and death. The gunners have lived so long with their cannon that they have come to have the same vibrant grace; they are like rapid automatics, supple and precise. The gestures of the men

who charge the guns have the violent and at the same time yielding elasticity of the pieces themselves, recoiling on their sliding runners. A fixed unity of many harmonious organs.

The captain says to me:

"I was wrong in my recriminations on the day of my arrival. I understand now that mask of persevering bitterness this long war has fixed on the faces of our soldiers, their patient efforts, their slow replies.

"We believed, we who fought during the first months of the campaign, that we presented the loftiest spectacles of human sacrifice. It was not so. Today is the time when it is beautiful to fight and to dare. After many months of war great souls alone are not weary. Those in whom the fury lasts and who unite the cunning of the present with the audacity of the past are the first among men. The poignant reality that has for so long scorched their eyes does not discourage their glorious ambition. One stands as-

tounded before this abnegation that grows ever keener, before this tenacious heroism that permits no impairment of a conscience chilled by so many visions of ferocity and death. . . . Of a race like ours we can hope everything."

The battery has been silenced. The gunners have gone to their shelter. The captain caresses with his gloved hand the slender glowing spines of our cannon, that perpetually hold out their smoking muzzles toward the enemy. Splendid huntsman, stroking his hounds of steel, forever leashed.

# LOVE

## X

### OUR FRIEND MUSIC

OUR corps has been off duty now for a fortnight, in a sunny village the soft outlines of which rise peacefully against the quivering heart of a forest.

The units impaired in the fighting have already been reconstituted and stoutly renewed. Misery and hardship are forgotten. A moist, happy smile lingers in the corners of our pale mouths.

We look at one another with a new joy. We admire one another. We recognize one another again. We love one another. Ten times a day we grasp the hands of comrades found again. My friends, you have touching gentlenesses, unexpected generosities, a bright, childlike gaiety that we never ex-

pected down there in those regions of madness and death.

For to be a soldier is to be a naked blade. It means to strip oneself of illusions, to stifle one's memories. It means to keep oneself single and strong for a sacred duty, for a sacrifice bitterly accepted. It is to make oneself dry, forceful, fit, a fierce and solitary soul from which the charms and amenities, the arts and all the radiant and peaceful graces of human society have ebbed away.

In a sudden, confused vision I recall the hard, sharp violence of all our actions during that long turmoil. . . . We spent fifty-seven days just north of V——, while the battle raged. And during that time I did not hear a single one of our men hum a refrain or whistle. Now and again they laughed in the midst of the uproar, passing back and forth a few gay or mischievous remarks. They never sang.

But here, in this verdant nook where the

rumbling of the guns is hushed in the distance, we have once more found our dear forsaken friend, music.

On an old, worn-out piano our commandant has been playing César Franck, Bizet and Mozart.

Tomorrow, in the neighboring village, our comrades of the —— Regiment of infantry are to give a recital of chamber music.

The radiant and mysterious face of music will bend for quite a long while over our hearts.

* * *

We have come on foot, taking our time, by the white, winding road. But we are an hour early. We wait outside the door.

The concert is to take place in the great grey hall of the primary school. A back-scene has been put up and a naïve decoration painted on it. The programme is well-chosen: Beethoven's "Tenth Quartette,"

César Franck's "Sonata" for piano and violin, the "Poem" of our great sorrowful friend Gabriel Dupont. The audience is an original one, variegated and throbbingly expectant: the colonel of the —— Infantry and his staff; a commandant of sharpshooters, with a thin, drawn face, crowned with a scarlet fez; some infantry officers, sad and reserved; troopers bearing themselves elegantly; black soldiers from the Antilles and Reunion, with noble carriage and eyes drowned with nostalgia; a few artillerymen, several doctors and, finally, a number of foot-soldiers, young and old, crowded together on the piled benches. Some have clambered up on the ledge of the immense bay, and their opaque, pathetic silhouettes stand out against the bluish light of the windows like the figures of martyrs on the stained glass of a church.

The opening measures of the Beethoven Quartette rise up amid the intent silence, the

heavy meditation of the subdued gathering. Impeccable and fervent is the execution of our soldier artists, who seem constrained in their tight, worn, faded uniforms. But we cease to think of the long arms of these fascinating violinists, cramped in their abbreviated sleeves. As they develop, the phases, charged with serenity and love, weaving their learned harmonies, opposing their scintillant fluctuations, lose and find themselves again in faithful divergence. A vast tide of sweetness submerges the souls of all. Our eyes shine with the splendor of a dawn that is glimpsed, of a presentiment of glorious hours approaching. . . .

Comes a brief interval, during which Lieutenant P——, enraptured, says to me:

"It 's understood, we shall get back Alsace-Lorraine."

"But I demand also that we annex . . . Beethoven."

"And Wagner?" someone asks.

"Ah, no! He 's too German. . . ."

The beloved voice of the violin soars upward again above the rippling and tinkling of the piano. Franck's "Sonata," grave and simple, wonderful in its plenitude, muffled, flowing, swelling, like limpid water gushing out of the earth. We are attuned to this true, pure harmony. Everything that is best in us and sane rises up within us, unfolds itself and sings with this candid melody. The men who are listening now have retaken the Fort of Douaumont. They have seen so many blood-stained brothers fall! They have lived on an ocean of murder and ferocity! And behold, they are like a crowd of innocent children. . . .

At last we hear the romantic modulations, so languishing, so tormented, of Gabriel Dupont's "Poem." Dear, gentle Gabriel, so swiftly ravished from our affection, how troubled you would be if you could see us again grouped about your work, the beauty

of which survives your fragility! You efface from the countenances of our men that sullen resignation, that obstinate weariness, that hopeless funereal abstraction. We bless you, in your still fresh grave, for bringing us tonight the consoling grace of your harmonious melodies, so supple and so fragrant, which take hold of us like arms that let fall a burden of blossoms before they embrace us.

We set out again for our cantonment, happy, comforted, like pilgrims who have been pardoned, wrapped in thought. A long swift silhouette is moving on the road. . . . It is young Lieutenant L——, anxiously running to meet me:

"Quick, quick, old fellow! We have received the order to move tonight. Hurry and buckle on your canteen. You precede the column. I have told your orderly to saddle your horse for two o'clock. . . ."

I hasten my preparations. My cloak, my field-glass, my map-case, my revolver, in the

flickering light of a candle. . . . L—— very kindly helps me to pack up my traps. I try to get an hour's sleep. . . . It is already time for me to go. . . . I leap on my horse . . . those wonderful sounds still ring in my ears. . . . Then everything is extinguished. My heart is dry, my head empty of memories. Farewell, soft, tender music! But I experience a confused uneasiness, a slight sense of shame! It is as if I had left a friend sleeping in the village, a friend I had not awakened to bid good-bye. . . . I am afraid of being behind time. We trot out into the cold wind of night.

* * *

The secret, impassioned language of music has such nobility, such mysterious magnanimity, that it alone would be able to translate for future ages the unknown grandeur of our soldiers' sacrifices, the whole violent scene that haunts our eyes.

But what musician will interpret the re-

nunciation, the fierce resignation of our men, the loftiness of their mission, of which they are themselves ignorant, the delirium that persists in them, their courage, humble or elated, their willing or unavoidable disdain of death and happiness?

Will my sagacious friend Vuillermoz point out to us just the right composer for this task?

Everything goes to prove that this musician will have to be very modern, of advanced and daring tendencies. He must renounce the out-of-date formula for heroism that has prevailed in the past. No more brass instruments, no joyous, well-cadenced hymns. Rather a heavy chant, slow, resolute, dim, with grave harmonies, patient, broken, disparate, spacious at one moment, dwindling the next.

Who will render that air beaten out by the brutal sonorities, the prolonged uproar of the cannon, the thin whine of the balls like that

of the mandolin, the repeated, balanced echo of the shells that spring across the valley, the rumbling of the motors, and then those eddying, stifled harmonies, occasionally that brief, mortal silence amid the gasping of men who are bidding farewell to life? . . . Who, finally, can relate the vibrant, chaotic disorder of a battle, this ending of the world — or this beginning — that is all about us, these primeval horrors amid the roaring of the heavy guns that recall the monsters of prehistoric time, the mammoths and the dinosaurs? Who will dare to recall, in a voice that is true, any episode of this cosmic turmoil?

## XI

### TRANSPARENT SOULS

THE world ascribes to the people of France an agitation in life and in language that is no longer borne out by the observation of today. Our men love silence. They have been used to living together so long and the events they witness are so overwhelming that perhaps they consider words useless and ideas vain.

They speak little. They think little; they try even not to think any longer of anything. I have often seen proofs of this stagnation of the spirit and the imagination in the brightest and most intelligent souls. It undoubtedly results from sheer weariness of the understanding, the sadness of feeling oneself a stranger to the joys of old.

But there is perhaps another explanation of it. A man only knows his place in the world through the contrasts and relations that he marks and measures about him. A life is rich and significant in proportion to the diverse and extended affinities and reactions which it discerns.

How can a soldier establish these correspondences and these disparities that would augment and determine his own thought? However far his eye ranges over these restricted spaces, he can see nothing but war, nothing but soldiers who act and think just as he does. And at the extremity of this stifling horizon, death. . . . Consciousness withers and forsakes him. What remains is nothing but a prescribed personality, reduced to a tame and strict regimen. His dull memory becomes torpid. There is nothing he can do. Everything in his soul is transparent and without depth, scentless, do-

cile, like water diffused over an immense space. . . . The soldier has slipped into his mental uniform.

## XII

### IN THE RUINS OF THE ABBEY

*To Colonel G. Huin.*

THIS Sabbath morning is calm and veiled like a convalescent. The air is still sharp, the wind keen. But already the spring appears, furtively, through the outworn scenery of winter. Some inexpressible feeling of frankness and goodness wells up in us. For an hour the struggle is forgotten.

We set out for mass. It is to be said in a subterranean chapel. The blinking lights of the acetylene lamps pierce the semi-darkness of the corridors. Deep, tortuous passages have been hewed out of the stone by our unknown ancestors.

After a stumbling journey of ten minutes through this cavernous obscurity, we reach

a sort of crossing where an altar rises, adorned with ivy and branches of fir: clever, patient hands have cut it out of the rock. A few squat pillars, rudely decorated, laboriously raise their masses like formless caryatids.

Already, the chaplain of infantry, in a grave, sad voice, has begun to roll out the sacred litanies, which echo, scarcely audible, down the reverberating caverns.

Our men have grouped themselves at the rear. Their fierce, emaciated faces have lost their expression of bitterness. Here and there, the bluish gleam of the lamps lights up a wrinkled forehead, a pair of eyes moist or burning under shaggy brows, a mouth naïvely open. . . . Some of the men are telling their rosaries; we hear the light click of the beads. The strong and the brave have laid aside their violence.

The medical student whispers to me shyly:

"You might think we were in the Musée

Grévin, old fellow. . . . The first Christians in the catacombs. . . ."

Well may that vision disturb our memory. The short, embossed columns that uphold the stone roof or brace the low, black arches suggest the pilasters of the crypts of some fabulous palace of Babylon or Nineveh. . . . Such nobility has the war given to our men that in their postures I see again the imperturbable rhythm of the warriors of the Assyrian bas-reliefs. . . .

Opposite, those peasants, workingmen and poor folk have grouped themselves by instinct with an infallible harmony. What twilight Veronese, dimming the brilliance of his palette, will paint this new evangelic episode in its strange, majestic ensemble?

I know of nothing more touching than the spectacle of these hardy, hairy fellows whose way lies through every sort of horror and atrocity, suddenly becoming humble and submissive as if they were priests.

There they pray, lost in adoration, overwhelmed with sacred melancholy. With gestures that are generous and pathetic they offer up their weary souls, freed from every impurity.

Have pity, O God, on them; have pity on me. . . . Our sorrows and our miseries seem to heap themselves up before the altar and take fire there, and when the divine office is finished, we withdraw, renewed and healed by the vital and mysterious flame.

* * *

We quit the dim, silent crypt and remount to the daylight.

It seems as if we had passed to another planet. Shells are bursting down there with the hollow noise of immense empty casks, violently struck. Ammunition-wagons rattle by and descend the tortuous broken roads, dragged along at a gallop. Files of infantry disappear in the winding trenches. And

below, in an improvised graveyard, some soldiers are digging two ditches for those artillerymen whose blood-stained corpses have been covered over with tent-cloths.

Commandant H—— has invited me to lunch. He is installed in an abandoned abbey, the ancient and venerable walls of which have been riddled, cracked, ravaged by the enemy guns. The chapter-room alone remains intact. It is there the table is laid.

The village, the beauty of which is still so touching, sleeps on a height. The Germans have unchained their fury against the lovely church whose great towers, every day bombarded, still dominate the horizon. These steep streets blocked with the ruins of ancient houses, these ravaged sanctuaries, speak to the soul and fill it with vanished biblical images.

A little more and one might think oneself

in some Jerusalem besieged by the barbarians.

The meal is simple. There are only three of us: the commandant, his aide, A——, and I. The major speaks to us of the destinies of our country.

Suddenly a deafening uproar makes the walls tremble. The cook, with the helmet of an English soldier on his head, dashes into the room.

"My commandant," he cries, "two great shells have just fallen beside my kitchen and the stove with the fritters has vanished. . . ."

Commandant H—— makes no sign. Calmly, gravely, slowly, he says:

"Well! Why do you wait to bring in the cheese?"

And he apologizes for offering me so frugal a luncheon.

## XIII

### AT DAYBREAK

THERE is a thin tinkle at the telephone, and we dash to the instrument. A far-away voice informs us briefly: "The enemy is attacking. Start the barrage fire."

Immediately, all the gunners are at their posts. The night is illumined by dazzling whirlwinds of flame rolling over the indistinct crests of the landscape. White, green and red rockets flash across the sky and burst into bright, many-colored jets. The guns vomit their fire and, as they recoil on the battery, resemble enfuriated gorgons, insatiable, drunken. Detonations mingle with explosions. It is like a mad gallop of heavy monsters over the vast, resounding levels. Innu-

merable enemy shells split the air with their whistling, hissing screams, their long plaintive cries, their dull roars, their deafening crepitation.

With my feet half-frozen and plunged in the heavy, sticky mud, I transmit the orders of the captain, who presently gives the command:

"Slacken fire! The attack is repulsed. . . ."

After this, we only respond to the shots we receive. . . . Till morning we continue to fire.

* * *

Little by little the darkness brightens. A diffused ashy light like the beginning of the world begins to spread over the atmosphere. A thin carpet of snow lies over the cloven earth, and the deep hollows are filled with mist and smoke. I glance at our men, at their harsh, wild faces, blue with cold and

hollow with fatigue. Not one softening thought. Their hearts are closed to memory.

It is a company of strange automata I have about me, and I feel as if I had fallen into some nameless planet such as Wells has imagined. . . .

It has been like this for two months. Not for a single moment has the intensity of the battle abated. Day and night the struggle goes on without respite.

Our men are wonderful in their tenacity and courage. Never before has such pure, vehement energy coursed through French veins. A human wall, stronger than stone, stronger than fire, bars the path of the invader. These soldiers, dressed in horizon blue, striped with yellowish mud, are the sky and the soil of France in action. The animated earth and the airy azure of the motherland have raised up in their image these

unconquerable defenders made of a fragment of our sod and a fragment of our firmament.

* * *

The landscape gently rises and casts off the veils of mist. The bare summits with their skeleton trees rise above the smoky valleys. Is it true that the spring began a whole month ago? Here no green thing shoots forth and the buds refuse to break on the blasted branches. Everything still preserves the severe, somnolent aspect of winter. One thinks of the disconsolate verse of Baudelaire:

Le printemps adorable a perdu son odeur! . . .

At our left, the barracks in the town is on fire. The rising flames besplash the misty horizon. One might think it a vast Persian carpet, fringed with grey, tossing in the wind. . . .

"My dear lieutenant, you are not wounded?"

It is G——, chief of the second gun, who throws himself upon me. I have received on my left shoulder a blow like that of a pick-axe. I touch myself. It is nothing. My clothes have acted as a buffer; the splinter has rebounded from the material without passing through.

But another shell bursts in front of the fourth piece. A cry. Murmurs. Five of our men are wounded. No one killed. The captain runs up. Gravely he examines the little bleeding wounds. "Nothing serious," declares the ambulance orderly.

Swiftly they dress the injured men. And detaching themselves from the heroic light of morning, a few bent and shadowy silhouettes move away from the oncoming dawn. . . .

## XIV

### GLEAMS IN THE SHADOW

IS it possible that the image of a son, a father, a lover can live on so intensely in the heart of women who remain behind? How many we see wandering, haggard, alien everywhere, in whom those the war has entombed rise again to life! . . . Great family of the hallucinated, of over-febrile sensibilities, double souls, doubly unhappy, fierce ones who insist on retrieving from death a strangely living memory, will the world keep for you, during the years that are to follow, the fervent pity it owes you? Ah, how it makes us long not to die out here when we think of you. . . . But we forget you, you who do not forget.

* * *

Living amid this daily returning horror, one acquires a quivering sensitiveness, an undreamed of modesty of feeling that covers an animal-like simplicity.

* * *

On bad days there steals over us gradually a weary stupefaction, a dull indifference to the quality and shapes of the things about us. Our consciousness is scattered, absorbed in the atmosphere, and we feel a confused horizon disclosing itself; vistas of the future open out before our dull gaze. . . . We are less moved by the precise aspect of things and people than by something indescribable that vibrates beneath them, by the mystery that enwraps them and illumines them, by their psychic prolongation, as a philosopher might say. . . . We no longer distinguish the past, or the present either. Our souls strain toward the future. It may

be that a little of the light of truth penetrates us. . . .

* * *

My best friend here is Lieutenant L——, who is very young. Under his air of the little "*taupin*" he conceals the soul of a logician, as cold, as old as the world. He has keen, keen eyes, eyes which, with a teasing, disconcerting swiftness, can reveal for you a man's secrets. And I say nothing of the way he has, truly a fine art, of touching the best-hidden wounds! Because I know his real fineness, he pleases me least when he likes to seem supercilious. People think he is cruel. He works well and hard. He distrusts his quick sensitiveness as if it were an enemy. In tragic hours I have known him to reveal an exquisite, devoted soul. Let me thank him for it here. One day, when he was wounded in the head, I realized that I loved him like a brother.

* * *

The little clean-shaven sergeant, whom the division has sent me for a signal-man, is talkative and has an air of elegance and authority. From among his many observations, delivered with a smiling scepticism, I recall these words:

"We don't sufficiently appreciate that modern war is, above everything, a theatrical performance."

The Germans seem to understand this, they who in their official communiqués entitle their fronts,—"Western theatre," "Eastern theatre." . . . Their kaiser seems to me a veritable stage manager — of a tragic stage, of course. . . . To astound the adversary, to stupefy him with emotion and terror, that is the idea. Speaking quite sincerely, when I mounted the parapet at the head of my section during the last attacks, I had the impression of finding myself on an immense platform with scenery. . . . Our cries, the explosions of our grenades upset the enemy

more than the losses we inflicted on them. We do not take sufficient advantage of our grenades, which burst with a redoubtable noise. We ought to use them and the shells alone. In advancing, we should astound the enemy with a horrifying uproar. . . . It is an odd thing, in battle one assumes without effort and as if by instinct the exaggerated poses of artless tragedians. . . . It is the theatre, lieutenant! — the Shakespearian theatre, my boy, where all the heroes of the piece are killed at the denouement, the "theatre of life," where people die. . . .

# DEATH

## XV

### FLASHES OF THE SWORD

QUARTER-MASTER LEBEL has been killed, the first of our unit. A rough face, heavy, blue eyes, a long blond moustache. A joker, a jolly fellow, always talking to the peasants. And also, I believe, timid. Thirty-nine years old. Married to a very pretty woman, he told me with satisfaction. Hard with the men, exacting in matters of duty. A good head gunner. Haughty or listless in the presence of his superiors, who never had very much sympathy for him.

On May 14th, in the evening, after having been thrown with him daily for a month and a half, I was able to catch a brief glimpse of

his soul. . . . It was raining. A sombre sky. Slipping into the tent I found him weeping. He was writing a letter. . . . And people called him harsh and hard-hearted.

"This mournful war!" he murmured. "My father is dying and I cannot go and see him again. . . . If I could only embrace him once more. . . ."

Just then his team arrived. Bruskly, with the back of his hand, he brushed away his tears. He seized the mallet, drove in the stakes energetically, stretched the ropes, inspected the horses' feed.

The next day Lebel was to go with me, at half past two in the morning, to the new position of our battery. It was still dark when we set out. I was to be on duty at the observation post. I left him near the guns, sad, his shoulders drooping.

At nine o'clock I left the observation post. The enemy had discovered the emplacement

of the battery. They were bombarding us. The great shells were bursting all about. The fire of the battery was on the point of recommencing: a single gun was going to shoot. But the captain, an old man, fresh from the clearing-station and thoroughly offensive alike in his sentiments, his manners, and his expression, orders a general muster. Lebel comes out of his burrow. At that very moment, an enemy shell falls on the shelter where the ammunition is, throws everything into disorder, bursts, and flings our own projectiles far and wide. Lebel falls, his breast and abdomen torn, one arm blown off. They carry him away. His mournful eyes are heavy with reproaches.

He tries to speak, without succeeding, and dies. . . . A minute after, the third gun fires. All our men are at their posts.

* * *

Quarter-master Carriat commanded the

piece that fired while Lebel was dying. A great jolly fellow, clumsy, always laughing, apparently without either authority or character. He had no love for the *marmites* and threw himself on the earth whenever they came. But at critical moments he was unequalled in audacity and coolheadedness.

It was eleven o'clock. We were having our lunch outside when two 105 shells burst over the battery. Berthon, the ambulance man, had his head blown off. A——, the big gunner, was ripped open in the chest. Finally, Carriat received a shot through the shoulder and a ball in the abdomen.

Everyone took refuge in the branch-trench. I heard Carriat cry: "Help! Help!"

I don't remember quite what happened then. I went out alone and flung myself on Carriat. I took him in my arms and carried him to the trench. The shells began to fall again; my wounded man was heavy. Someone brought a stool out of the trench, and I

began to take off his jacket. The splinter that had entered his shoulder had made only a small wound. The blood trickled out slowly in a thin stream.

I said, in all sincerity:

"It 's nothing serious. A scratch,—you 'll be all right soon."

Carriat turned white, then greenish, then grey, then black. . . . Two men, A—— and Ch——, dashed out to get the stretchers belonging to a battery of 75's, two hundred meters behind us. The plateau was being shockingly bombarded.

I ask myself how the two men can get back without an accident. Salvos of 105's and 150's are falling without interruption. Finally, one lands on the other wounded men. . . . Eight days later Carriat died. We all supposed he had been only slightly injured. We have sent the military medal to his family.

Throughout this whole tragedy I felt as it

were intoxicated with a pure and lofty sense of freedom, which death and the supreme emergencies of life could not diminish. . . .

Three days later, the captain gave me this note:

"You held yourself well under fire."

But, all the same, he opposed my promotion from a second lieutenancy. . . .

* * *

Berthon, the ambulance man, had only arrived at the front a month before. A brave fellow, young, delicate, and very gentle. He loved hard work.

He had even been a *pointeur*. . . . Since we had been at our new position, he had been digging with a surprising tenacity, coming to the aid of his comrades who were constructing shelters.

He had taken us into his confidence. For two years he loved a young servant of his brother. They had a child which he was

bringing up. He expressed his desire to marry her before his military service, and again before his departure for the front. . . . And then . . .

I said to the captain:

"We have a duty to fulfil toward the orphan. Do you think it would be a mistake to write to the mayor or to Berthon's parents to tell them about the intentions of that poor fellow?"

The captain, who had confessed to us the excesses of his own disorderly youth, replied:

"So much the worse for them! Why did n't they get married? Bastards don't interest me. . . ."

There were tears of rage and impotent pity in our eyes.

* * *

My God, could any ceremony have been more impressive than that mass, said in the little church of Anzin, for Berthon's burial!

The nave was entirely dark, except for the faint, twinkling light of a few candles. Four infantrymen — killed in the village square — lay, fully dressed on the stretchers. . . . Berthon's body was in a coffin, for we had bought the planks to make one for our comrade. The others were to be thrown into the earth, without anything. . . .

An old priest timidly sang the mass; and a sister of charity, sixty years old, undertook the office of sacristan and choir-boy. She said the responses in a sad, tremulous voice. . . . What a desolate spectacle. . . .

The captain stood beside the grave and spoke a few words. It embarrassed us to see him venturing to discourse so loudly in that solemn, heavy atmosphere of death. . . .

* * *

It is a poor grave, adorned with a cross made of two sticks. At the top is inscribed, awkwardly, hesitatingly:

"Zouave?? Chasseur??"

Soon afterward, the body was disinterred. . . . We buried it again. A second shell uncovered it. It was given another reverent burial by the sad, devoted men.

But still a third shell flung the ghastly remains in the air. . .

The men now call it "the clown."

When a shell strikes near the grave and they see the earth and bones flying about, they say, indifferently:

"Hello! There 's Gugusse jumping again!"

By what malediction is that nameless thing pursued?

* * *

The receivers fastened to his ears, the telephone sergeant transmits the orders of the lieutenant on observation. Enemy shells are bursting close about the post. . . . He pays no attention to the firing. His mind is pas-

sionately intent on its object. . . . One telephonist has just been hit, mortally. Covered with blood, he crawls to the feet of the sergeant, clasping his legs in a wild and final embrace. And the sergeant keeps on telephoning, hearing nothing, seeing nothing, feeling nothing. . . . At last, the arrangements finished, he rises and finds himself alone with his dead comrade, encircling him with his supplicating and already rigid arms. . . .

* * *

We flounder heavily through the trenches. We glance about. The soil looks dry. There is a sharp, complex odor, an odor of corpses. I question a spirited little lieutenant:

"Well, there 's nothing surprising in that. Since the last attack, they 've buried the dead in the trenches. . . . Little by little, the earth that covers them has grown thin. And

we slip over the gelatined legs of a lot of corpses. . . ."

The man with me has a desperate look, wild, indefinable.

* * *

In the trenches taken from the enemy in our May attacks. Full of sand-bags of many unexpected colors. Evil-smelling saps, still bedraggled with the equipments of the Prussian guard. From one parapet issues a withered, bony forearm, terminated by a hand of which the fingers are dried and skeleton-like. The soldiers have made a hat-rack of it. Quite as a matter of course, they hang their helmets on it.

* * *

The explosion of a shell has buried this Prussian in a curious way. His head and his legs are entombed. His shoulders and

back are exposed, in an upright position, against an abutment over a firing-bench. And to mount the declivity of the trench one uses the soft, broken, putrified shoulder as a stepping-stone. . . . Death is no longer the mysterious power, chilling, sovereign, of old. We brush against it without taking fright. It is a familiar personage who bores us, disgusts us, benumbs us. . . . We smile at it sometimes, sometimes we shake our fists at it as at the enemy — when it has been too abominable.

## XVI

### A MEUSE NOCTURNE

WE were shut in by the night as by a great black prison. Supply wagons encumbered the road. The men were busily piling the projectiles in the ammunition shelters of the batteries. In their haste to get away the drivers scarcely set foot to the ground.

The whistling of the shells rent the air of night. A horse pranced on the resounding earth. Moving silhouettes revealed themselves with precision in the sudden flash of an explosion. And we heard a great cry.

A projectile had fallen on the horses of an ammunition wagon that had just been emptied. The middle driver, C——, was killed. The forward driver was thrown

under the wheels of a cart and severely wounded. The rear driver, G——, lightly hit, was dragged off into the night by the maddened horses of the grating wagon.

Two hours later, we saw G—— coming up, driving alone in echelon the three teams of his ammunition wagon. Calm and pale, he saluted the adjutant and unhitched the horses. He went to rouse his comrades at their gun. Finally, he wept, telling them that C—— was dead.

* * *

They carried C——'s body to the Refuge. . . . He had not suffered. A splinter struck him in the heart. He was a great fair-haired fellow, boisterous and gentle, a brave, careful soldier. The men of his gun felt for him an almost reverent admiration. "Though he was a mason," S—— said to me, with tears in his eyes, "he could have got the better of many in geography."

He had talked to them about beautiful countries, with enchanted names, and about the burning tropics, and he transpierced their shut-in hearts with exaltation and nostalgia.

N——, the forward driver, had twenty wounds and two broken ribs. Doctor B——, after dressing those that were most urgent, sent him away, assuring him that he would get well. He did not utter a word of complaint. With eyes dilated and swimming in tears, he murmured:

"I tell you I saw the shell coming toward me; I saw it swoop down, like a red hawk, just beside me."

The ambulance men, incredulous, listened to him with a pitying irony.

"Yes, yes, my boy, but you must keep quiet."

Two more projectiles burst in the neighborhood of the batteries. One would have said they had overturned the shadowy ramparts of the night, for immediately there ap-

peared a sort of ashy dawn, fringed with rose.

* * *

We were discovered by the enemy. All day he continued to send us asphyxiating and tear-shells. The soldiers have worn their masks. And we have the air of taking part in some dismal masquerade.

In the midst of the incessant bombardment our men, by a miracle of ingenuity and courage, have hunted out some planks and put together a coffin for C——. . . . Stout Ch——himself, who has n't the reputation of exactly loving the clatter of shells, ran about, leaping like a mad goat, amid the explosions. He was looking for leaves and branches, on that smoking, devastated hill, and he found enough to bind together and make a verdant cross and a crown.

Captain D—— came down to the Refuge to place it on C——'s bier. He came again at the end of an hour.

"I have given orders for them to carry the coffin as far up as the position of the battery. So C—— will spend his last day among his comrades. . . ."

Captain D—— reflected a moment. Then:

"It 's curious," he confided to me, "I thought I should be completely upset when I saw C——'s body, and I was not deeply disturbed. I wanted to help put him in the coffin myself. My reverent hand did not tremble. You see, his poor corpse is too ravaged, too different from what we have known. I have in my memory a lively, happy image of that remarkable soldier. I shall keep it. However unkind and deforming death was to him, it has left him with me intact."

* * *

The coffin, trimmed with a few leafy branches, remained till evening at the head-

quarters of our battery. The enemy never ceased firing at our position. We feared lest a shell might injure the sad bier, so laboriously constructed. The humble remains were confided to our care, and it pained us that this tumult might once more disturb the last sleep of the unhappy C——. The tear shells of the adversary set floating through the air their clouds of incense and odors of wax. . . .

. At nightfall, the officers of the group and the men of the battery gathered about the coffin. All raised their helmets. Captain D—— had scribbled a few notes on a paper. The voice of the commandant rose, clear and strong, amid the orgy of artillery that was letting itself loose. It brought us words of comfort, hope and energy. Beside me, L—— had tears in his eyes.

"What 's the matter?"

"My dear fellow, I can't help it. . . . those tear-shells. . . ."

"Come now, this is a nice time when they 've stopped sending us any, and the wind has blown the poisonous mist away."

"You bore me. . . . I tell you they still make my eyes smart. I shall have to put on my mask. . . ."

And turning his back on me, L—— actually takes out his mask and conceals himself behind it.

* * *

The men slept, fully dressed, in their damp shelters. A heavy sleep, broken with nightmares and heavy cries. Our guns, their muzzles casting forth tiny glints of steel, lay squat in the shadow like jackals with phosphorescent eyes.

Captain D—— was more moved than he had admitted. He could not bring himself to lie down. All night he remained near me, walking nervously about on the black, powdery earth of our position. But I could not

distinguish any trace of emotion on his face.

Some rockets shot up, sweeping through the night, which was no longer broken by the brilliant glare of the explosions. A heavy silence enveloped all things. And this deceitful calm on top of such a mad frenzy was more disquieting than the tempest of an attack. The feverish sentries kept their eyes tirelessly on the horizon where the enigmatical adversary lay concealed.

## XVII

### THE SKELETON BEFORE THE TRENCH

SEVERAL days ago we left those misty valley regions where we lived for more than a year. We were happy to quit them. But we left down there, amid the upheaved earth, good, sober comrades whom we shall never see again.

A wild, mysterious resignation reigns over our hearts. We no longer keep any memory of the past. Our hearts are set on the present. We long to surprise the future. Later, memories will have plenty of time to blossom. . . . The few thoughts we have are pure and simple in outline, frank and direct in feeling. And action has driven melancholy away.

Today, it is my turn to go to our new observation post. The sun has not yet risen. We breathe in the mist and the chill. The winding trench which we follow has retained the rain-water and it runs with the declivity. We sink in the mud up to the knees. We flounder. I see I must do something decisive. I remove my buskins and socks and lift as high as I can my drawers and my breeches. The telephonists follow my example. And lightened and fastened up, our calves exposed, our feet naked, we take up our march.

* * *

After several detours, several stops, we arrive at the appointed spot. The infantrymen look at us with calm, heavy eyes. Then, with joyous gestures, they crowd eagerly about us. The officers welcome me. It is not yet six o'clock in the morning, but early as it is they oblige me to smoke a cigar which they offer me. I am over-heated.

A feeble, creeping breeze stirs and shakes the mist and liberates the uncertain light. In a few minutes, the contours of the strange landscape that opens before us have come together, bathed in the reconciling dawn.

* * *

I open out the chart. A captain of infantry shows me the enemy positions and we make a survey of the horizon. Nothing escapes the vigilance of my companion. While he is speaking in his deep, tense voice, I observe our objectives.

A stifled cry behind us makes me turn around. R——, the telephone sergeant, his eyes wide and flaming, points to a spot to the west of the national road. His hoarse, hard words issue with difficulty from his contracted throat.

"Down there, Lieutenant, do you see . . . there are fourteen of them . . . I have counted. . . ."

I do not at first distinguish what he is pointing at. Then, suddenly, with heart throbbing, in a calm, casual voice:

"Ah! yes. . . . I see them. . . ."

Quite at our left, before the parapet of the enemy trench, several long, blue spots. . . .

They are our own men whom we were not able to relieve. . . . There they are prostrate, their faces toward the sky, as if looking for vengeance and retaliation. . . . Some of them are face down against the earth, their arms crossed, so gently lying there that one would say they were embracing once more the well-loved soil for which they had died.

I observe them with the field-glass. No distressing contortions, no disconsolate postures. Their attitudes are harmonious, fascinating, dignified. They are as if struck with beauty.

Why has no one been able to bury them? How long have they been there?

Captain M—— interrupts my revery:

"You are looking at those dead men down there. . . . We were able to drag three of them here. But eight others were massacred while they were on their way to seek their comrades. . . .

"Two enemy machine-guns were turned on the pathetic group. We have tried to reclaim our men at all hours of the night. Every time the adversary discovers our pious enterprise. And when the wounded fall the Prussians continue to fire on them. . . . It became necessary for the colonel to give orders to end these deadly excursions. If you knew how hard it has been to make the men respect those instructions! . . . How dull they are, those Boches! Don't they understand how that melancholy vision increases our fury? But turn a little. Three hundred meters away, there, on the summit of the parapet, you will see something still stranger. . . ."

* * *

Sergeant R—— is half-strangling with a furious oath. A skeleton looks as if it had been set up in front of the German trench. It is on its knees. We distinguish a pair of blue breeches still covering the bent legs. The head and the arms are missing. We see nothing but the thorax of which we are able to count the ribs and descry the vertebral column. By what miracle is it standing upright? Have our enemies placed it there to frighten those who are pursuing them?

But behold! that skeleton is facing the enemy. From the silence of death it wrests a radiant, strong, implacable meaning. It seems still to bar the road of the barbarians, to forbid them to pass. It is there like an unfailing guardian, uttering an endless war-cry. What matter that the frail and perishable flesh has vanished! The frame remains. It stands there, a symbol of our will.

We fight no longer merely to the last drop

of our blood, but to the last grain of dust of our last bone!

A number of infantrymen are approaching us. The skeleton, the advance sentinel, still impresses on our souls its pure, powerful signification. Is not this awful attitude better, my brothers, is it not better, Jean, Pierre, Paul, than burial in the breast of the obscure earth? Ah, God, if we must die, grant that, rising above the abyss, overleaping the beyond, bursting the tomb asunder, our upright corpses may arrest and defy still, with all their outraged pride, the invading horde!

## XVIII

### A DESCENT INTO HELL

F—— has come to see me. His company has been relieved. He did not have the strength to go to his cantonment and has stopped at the position of our battery.

Before the war, my friend was the most elegant of our writers, as much by the cut of his clothes as by the subtlety of his discourse. Today, he wears a cloak bedraggled with mud, and boots that are unrecognizable. . . . His conversation is of a bold familiarity and he is the intimate friend of the simplest peasants of his country.

F——, who is hungry, has an irresistible feeling of sympathy for our cook. It is a rare and touching sight. My comrade has

passed four sleepless nights. He cannot bring himself to take off the boots that cause him so much suffering. And you should see with what infinite care our cook cuts the laces and draws them off. . . . He has even insisted on bathing the sore feet, covered with bluish swellings. The historic gesture and the sad fatigue of him who has provoked it touch us almost to tears.

We have rubbed and dressed the poor boy. And now, he laughs, happy, his eyes still strange and weary. Once more I recognize that strong soul of his. When he speaks, you feel yourself in tune with some indescribable melody and everything that is best in you springs up in your heart.

* * *

After his rest, I accompanied F—— to his cantonment. We had some long talks. Once more I found him the lover of grand ideas, the passionate devotee of rare truths.

"You must n't think," he said to me, "that the war has brutalized me. Even the ferocious acts we are obliged to commit seem to me without significance. . . ."

"Just how do you mean?"

"Our murderous ancestral habits have reconquered us perhaps, those inheritances plunged in the depths of the ages as in an ocean which the storm throws up again to the surface. But I doubt if I have ever been so free from the sluggishness of matter, from the standards of the brute, as I have since I was thrown into this tragic chaos of men and things."

"Impenitent idealist!"

"Wait a moment. It is as much so with you as with me. And what would remain for us if we could not escape from this circle of hell?"

"We should appreciate better the simple, terrestrial joys that we have scorned. . . ."

"No, on the contrary, I think that the

unheard-of devastations of this war strengthen the mystical things and show us the true value of the goods of life. . . . One single message from these troublous times inscribes itself, in letters of fire, on the proud conscience: to seek amid appearances and agitations the central truth and the inner strength of things."

"I hardly grasp statements of that kind. . . ."

* * *

F—— paused. He looked at me intently. In a deep anxious voice he replied, feverishly:

"Listen. I have told no one else what I am going to tell you. They would think me mad. But you, you perhaps will be able to understand it. . . . And I need to express, to get outside me, to put into words, these memories that scorch and haunt me.

"You know we made an attack four days ago. The enemy was forewarned. To our

artillery preparation, he replied with a counter-preparation which lost us a good many of our men. Before we came out of the trenches a third of the effectives of our company were disabled. At the moment when we leaped over the parapet, we heard the cries of our wounded, our dying. Our objective was the cemetery of P——. We bounded out, intoxicated, eager to come to conclusions with the enemy and existence. I pass over the incidents, the usual ferocious incidents, of the attack. . . .

"At last we arrived at the cemetery, which was slashed with trenches, in a confusion of scattered bones and tombstones. For my part, I installed myself in a granite mausoleum which had already served the enemy as a company headquarters. I remained there till the next night.

"Can I give you any idea of how I lived in that place? . . . At first, I was too feverish, too occupied with organizing our resist-

ance. During the night, there were two counter-attacks which we repulsed. At dawn, I was actually able to sleep, in that tomb, for two hours. . . . I awoke screaming, I don't know why. . . . A moment after came another counter-attack. I saw the assailants descending the slopes, grotesque, fantastic, with their ludicrous masks, tumbling, yelling. . . . We remained masters of the field, despite the intense bombardment of the adversary. I returned to my cave.

"When things reach a certain degree of dreadfulness they become almost comic. I had a silent laugh as I thought over this sinister scene. But I was tormented with thirst and my canteen was empty. . . . I had a sort of stroke of dizziness. The cold of the stone penetrated me. . . . I was alone in the narrow crypt. I cast aside my helmet, feeling the need of talking,— perhaps to drive away a mysterious fear that came over me.

"'Well, how are you?' I said, smiling.

'You see I 've come to visit you, dear Death. . . . An unseasonable visit, eh? You tried to conquer me when I was struggling with you. Now I throw myself into your arms; I embrace you; I acquiesce utterly. I await your orders.'

"I must have been speaking very loudly. Someone thrust his head through the opening of the cenotaph. I heard a whisper. Then a new evening enveloped us. We should have been relieved during the night. No one came. They had forgotten us.

* * *

"I despatched several *liaison* men to our people. None of them came back. On the third morning the enemy himself seemed to be appeased. I was no longer in communication with our headquarters. Already we were short of ammunition and food. As for me, I had nothing left, either to eat or to drink. Hunger was making me dizzy. And

I did not venture to ask the men for a biscuit. As I looked about, a terrifying idea took possession of me: we were cut off from the living. A door had closed abruptly on life, on our past, and we were plunged in a night that was vast and black.

"I stretched myself out on the straw in my sepulchre and tried to sleep. Racked with pain, crushed with fatigue, I finally reached the last extremity. . . . I experienced an indefinable sensation: as I lay on my side, it suddenly seemed to me that I had risen out of my mortal vestment, that my personality had quitted my body. I saw my actual skeleton, shorn of its muscles and twisted in the attitude which I had taken; I saw my smooth skull, my striate thorax, my slender shin and thigh bones. . . . It seemed to me that I was at the bottom of an immense flight of steps — and that I was being pushed even lower. A single ray of greenish light followed me like a glaucous eye. . . .

"Presently, I heard something like the crumbling of the walls of a prison. . . . My liberated spirit eddied round, a keen, scanty flame, against the paleness of an unknown world. . . . And I had the grave, tranquil impression that I had entered into a comprehension of the universal, that I had penetrated into the heart of truth.

* * *

"Things no longer had separate shapes, things were no longer far or near. I felt myself united, blended with all things. The worlds and the planets streamed together, a dense and acrid smoke. Stone and iron were no longer anything but transparent shadow. What surprised me was the dwindled size of this cold, stifling mist which to me represented the infinite universe. In a tiny corner of it, condensed, piled up, and as if stuck together, there swarmed a mass of minute moths, which were devouring each other. . . .

"Little by little, the grey mass became denser and turned golden, and the flying, dancing molecules crowded still more closely together. . . . But it was all so small that a child could have held it between his fingers like a light handful of sand.

"A bluish light cast certain outlines into relief. It seemed to me that I was more spacious than the earth and the sun and that my head struck against the stars the mild serenity of which gave to my soul a message of harmony, peace and love. . . .

"Meanwhile, everything about me grew larger, and my spacious life contracted. . . . I returned to this sad globe of ours, which seemed to me a planet like the moon, dead, enclosed in a black shell, burned and cracked with flaming orifices. . . . Creeping hordes clutched and tortured this sombre thing which was for me the earth. . . .

"Of a sudden, everything was transformed to the proportions of reality. Once more it

seemed to me that some unknown aerial spirit was refashioning, with careful ardor, the framework of my body; it polished the bones of my skeleton, curved the ribs and reassembled the elements of my frame, like the pieces of a complex machine; it arranged, united and connected the muscles and the sinuous veins, set in the eyes, pushed the brain into its bony box, laid in the heart, suspended the lungs in the pectoral cage. . . . When all the organs were fixed and united, it enveloped them in the robe of flesh. But this being of mine was frail and insignificant. By a thousand luminous strings the spirit attached it to the inscrutable substances of the universe. . . . The strange automaton developed and I was precipitately thrown back to my impressions of childhood. . . .

"I found myself exhausted, broken, as if during the years I had wandered the world over.

"An hour later we were relieved. I expe-

rienced an indescribable sense of humiliation, like that of a slave. And I was surprised to find myself feeling as if an unknown force had thrown me back to the primal ooze.

* * *

"Since then I remain persuaded that I have penetrated an essential secret and that the unheard-of sufferings I have endured have brought me knowledge of the absolute. . . . I believe that with trembling arms I have grasped the truth. I believe I have penetrated into the supreme simplicity,—simplicity, you understand. For that is not simple which puts trust in those two fallacious spheres, our eyes, nor is that true which lives the common mirage wherein we agitate ourselves.

"Do you remember that picture of Rembrandt, 'Jacob and the Angel'? I keep seeing Jacob, pressing to his breast, with all the force of his knotted muscles, the archangel

who smiles with pity and glides away, rises and leaves that man so resolute to imprison him in his arms. . . . That is just what I have experienced. Can you understand? A storm has convulsed the sleeping waters of my innermost being.

* * *

"But the death through which I have passed in the fire of my thought has not given me absolution. It has corroded me, it has set its mark upon me. . . . I have always in my mouth a taste of cinders, a bitterness that nothing can efface. I abhor the leaders who direct this society of disorder and hatred; I see them as cruel, selfish and base. I find in my fellow-creatures nothing but pitiful ugliness, falsehood, and injustice. . . .

"I feel I shall not come back from the war. But what is most tragic in this is that I recognize my own stigma upon all my fu-

ture companions under the soil. It is this that scorches me and haunts me.

"Every moment, I look my life in the face and ask myself: 'Have I accomplished my destiny as I should? Have I been good, wise, noble? Has my love been efficacious? Have I helped those who are dearest to me? Have I done my share of the work of all the strong, dissatisfied, passionate souls who have passed through this life? Have my appeals been heard on this wide and shadowy road which is humanity?'

"Do not try to console me. You would only increase my confusion and strengthen the conviction that is killing me.

"Be assured, I shall do my duty like all those of my race. But to your friendly hands I surrender my plans, my ardor, my strength, that you may serve them, augment them, perpetuate them."

* * *

Twelve days after this conversation my

friend F—— died. Since then, his memory has been to me like a tempest.

* * *

For a long time we have been dwelling under the earth, in the earth. In his heart, in his secret we have lived. What can we derive from it? And how can we bring it up to the surface of the world?

Are we to become once more men of ferocity, slaves of the sovereign instinct to live and to destroy? Is more clay to be added to our scallop-shell of dust? Is our animality going to be increased or are we going to quit this heavy tenement and rise again, pure, light, different?

## XIX

### THE SLAVE OF MINOS

DOCTOR B——, whose fine sensibility we love, has been my companion during this icy night. With his nervous gestures, his lively eye, he has given me certain details regarding the death of my comrade, Lieutenant F——.

"Without doubt, F—— was a wonderful soul. But one can't help feeling that he died uselessly, foolishly. . . . A veritable suicide, when you come to think it over.

"The enemy had made a number of small attacks on the entrenchment defended by F——'s company. I shall not dwell on the vicissitudes of that bitter struggle. You know them already. I found myself near

the major, five hundred meters behind our friend, and we were preparing to intervene. F—— had repulsed three assaults, and the adversary did not expose himself again for two hours.

"Suddenly, a series of shells exploded in our neighborhood. A moment after, we heard pantings, steps flapping in the mud. . . .

"'Don't shoot. It 's our own men!' cried the sentry.

"Just then, F—— and a group of fifty soldiers of his company threw themselves into our trench, breathless, with anxious eyes, their faces haggard. Immediately, the major summoned Lieutenant F—— and demanded explanations. . . . I can still see him approaching, panting, running with sweat, grave, and so young.

"'Where have you come from?' enquired the commandant, in a rough voice.

"'We were surrounded. Our ammunition

was beginning to give out. I tried to communicate with you, without succeeding. Then I gave the order to retreat. We have opened a breach. And here we are.'

"'You should have held out at all costs and not left your post.'

"'We were unable to hold out any longer. We should all have been taken.'

"'Then you believe you have done your full duty?'

"F—— drew back a step. He flushed, began to tremble; then, with mounting excitement, he said:

"'Yes, my commandant, I did my duty,— I am sure of that — my full duty! You do not believe that I left because I was afraid. . . .'

"'I beg you to make me a calmer report.'

"F—— was choking with rage and despair.

"'I was not afraid, my commandant! I do not know what it is to be afraid. . . . Do

you wish me to prove that I am not afraid? . . .'

"F—— was already climbing up the firing-bench. The major tried to stop him.

"'Wait, wait, my friend; I 'm not in any way reproaching you," he besought him.

"But F—— had lifted himself on the parapet. He gesticulated, challenged the enemy. . . . A hail of bullets tossed him into the trench, shot through the throat and breast.

"At this point my memory grows confused. I recall only that we caught F——, three or four of us, and carried him to the Refuge. He was still breathing, but was unable to speak. He only looked at us, out of his great, good eyes, which shone with so tender and happy a light, so strange a serenity. . . . I would have given everything in the world to save him. F—— was dead, he had been dead a quarter of an hour, and I still continued to lavish on him my miserable

attentions. . . . And all the time his eye was so clear, so profoundly living. . . . We wanted to close his eyelids. It was impossible. . . . The commandant wept in a corner. Every minute, the trembling voice of one of his men demanded news of F——.

"An hour later, we recaptured the abandoned trench. The following day we were relieved. We buried our friend at N——. . . . I was unable to close his eyes, whose sweet and faraway light pursues my memory. . . . The major has asked for a change of regiment."

* * *

Snow had been falling for several days. It masked the houses, the fields, and the trees. The sky looked like a frozen pond. The outlines and perspectives of things were effaced. There were a few faint, bluish, trembling shadows. How white the night seemed! The world this evening was a vast pale ter-

race obliterating the men, overhanging the summits of the hills.

Despite the embrace of a bitter melancholy we had a feeling of lucidity, fascination. . . . Doctor B—— repeated over and over with agitation:

"Yet, I keep asking myself if I really caught the last expression of our friend F——, if, in his supreme moments, he was not still tormented by the reproach of a great work that had not been fulfilled. . . ."

"No, no," I say; "men cannot any longer judge him."

* * *

Doctor B—— was silent. The cold made us shiver. I tried to call up the image of my friend F——, who kept his great eyes open in the grave. . . . Some indescribable feeling of bewilderment took possession of me; my head felt dizzy. Everything reeled about me. I was on the point of crying out. It seemed to me suddenly that the body of

F—— lay before us, barring our way, stretched out on the snowy plain as upon an immense operating-table. I marked all the hidden fluctuations of his sensibility. . . . Truly, it was F——. And yet I saw in him a thousand fugitive resemblances with every one of our men. His violet lips stirred, as a voice, impersonal, passionate, issued from them:

"Do not too loftily censure our susceptibility. . . . Be discreet with your praises and your reprimands. You should know this well enough, you who have renounced friendship, love, happiness, the whole precious existence which your ambition promised itself. The sacrifice we have acquiesced in has made us so pure that no man can any longer comprehend or judge us. . . . Life has withdrawn from us like a song slowly extinguished. The memory we leave behind is a tapestry of confused and faded colors. . . .

"What consolations, what flatteries will

diminish the secret bitterness of those who have surrendered everything? And who would dare to reckon up their merits or calculate the value of such mysterious, intrepid resolves? The praise and the blame of others do not befit our deeds. Let them watch us go by in silence,— the silence which respects a soul that a mere nothing can wound. . . . Let them not ask our consciousness to leave the twilight which it loves and where it finds nothing supportable but its own despair. . . .

"We have broken all our human ties. We are solitary and multitudinous, a brotherhood, yet strangers to one another. And behold, we have penetrated to the ramparts that separate us from oblivion; we find ourselves already entangled in the labyrinth of the unknown crypt; our eyes are already habituated to its nocturnal brightness. . . . We gravitate toward death. We feel its breath on our faces. And nothing distracts

us from its imperishable presence. Others live their life, we begin to live our death. . . .

"From the dark house of life, from all that evil energy that weighs so heavily on the soul, we have made our escape. Swiftly indeed have we accomplished the cruel task of living. After this, everything would have seemed to us grey and flameless. For us another world is necessary.

"The soldiers who swarm, sombre and violent, along the lines of battle, are already dead. . . . But the war gives them a special vision. They are already capable of mastering a little of the truth. For them, hereafter, death is there where you imagine life, and life where you imagine death. . . . They belong already to the earth, they have returned to it, caught up again in its flaming intimacy, its unfathomable depth.

"The rest, those who feel fear for their bodies, are the comedians of oblivion. Their eyes, when they shine, have diffused and vit-

reous gleams. Their bodies, which they guard with such avarice, add to the accumulation of corpses that form the crust of the earth. . . .

"But it is an alluring light, pure and sweet, that you see in the fixed eyeballs of our dead, as if across the inert veil of their retinas you perceived the inner and faraway flame of our planet. We have no need of your pity, nor of your funeral orisons. The dead and the living of our struggling armies are already linked in the same original mystery, engulfed in the same clay. . . ."

A sudden warmth spread through my chest. Doctor B—— slapped my hands. I found myself in the snow, at the foot of a chestnut tree that was rimed with white. . . .

"What 's the matter, my boy?" the doctor exclaimed. "What 's happened to you? You fell in a heap right in front of me. Do you feel a little better?"

"Yes."

"Lean on me. We are going back."

I had the sensation of bursting some indescribable shroud. A boundless, imploring love flowed from my heart toward all men and things.

* * *

How can one explain that irresistible sense of brotherhood we feel with the trees, with the undulating fields, with all of earth's creations, however much or little is their portion of life? Have we already an obscure presentiment that we are to lie in that bitter soil, confused with everything it has cast up from itself, that we are indeed to serve as the nourishment, the substance and the passion of that shadowy and voracious despot?

* * *

Out of the tumult of the forces that agitate us I have taken at random the emotions and the dreams that have tempted me. I

have striven to recapture and imprison, within the lines of a sustained plan, our life as it is,— captive, covered with bizarre patinas, ruthless, mournful, beset with illusion, and I should like to prolong my story through the monotonous days to come. . . .

But here action, simple, brutal action, prevails over meditation and sets it at naught.

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